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Vincent Sekhar

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Religious Institutions and Social Development - I

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Editorial

This issue of *Jeevadhara* explores the topic "Religious Institutions and Social Development". Religion does not exist in vacuum. It is situated in society among social groups, institutionalized to most extent. Every religion claims to have a social relevance, and is prophetic in its engagement. Every religion assures a society of love, justice, equality, and fellowship. Religious founders and their successive leaders keep promising 'this-worldly' happiness besides emphasizing 'other-worldliness'. In contemporary times, religions, bereft of social focus and involvement, are seen 'meaningless' and 'dreadful' by all, especially by youngsters who want religions to be the vehicle of social elevation, and peace rather than war.

Established and structured religious traditions (like Christianity) have published a series of well-written social documents, surveying the fleshy part of peoples' engagement in society and politics. These documents are, at the least for the Christians, motivating, admonishing, and warning in many ways. There are other people who do not belong to any structured religion like the humanists, tribals, nature worshipers, etc., who also lead a 'disciplined' moral and social life with minimum structures. NGOs working with them with certain devotion and religious commitment make known such people's identity to the Govt. officials and to the public, fight for their rights, help them in their education and employment, and restore their face with dignity. There are other occasions, especially crisis like the earthquake and the floods, when religious institutions plunge into social service and charity.

Keeping these in mind, this issue of *Jeevadhara* brings to limelight how religious communities and their institutions have made an impact on society in specific ways. Prakash Louis' article shows how the

Catholic tradition has been in the forefront through its doctrines and programs in social development. Soka Gakkai is an internationally renowned organization, motivated by Buddhist principles. Joan Anderson of this organization introduces the voices of members of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI), engaged in environmental activism in various fields and countries around the world. Racial relation has always been a crucial issue in the world, especially in the USA. Leo Lefebure portrays the history of the not-yet resolved issue of racial relations vis-a-vis Christian faith in America. In India, the Sramana traditions such as Jainism and Buddhism have played a major role in sustaining and promoting the value and practice of non-violence. Vincent Sekhar takes the clue from their sources to show that Ahimsa or non-violence has remained till date in the psyche of the Indian people.

Vincent Sekhar

Editor

Religious Institutions and Social Development

Prakash Louis

This article shows how the Catholic tradition has been in the forefront through its doctrines and programs in social development. Dr. Prakash Louis is the Principal of St. Anne's School, Bihar. He was the Executive Director of the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi and as well as Director of Indian Social Institute, Bangalore. He contributes regularly to journals like Economic and Political Weekly, Mainstream, Social Change, Vikalp and Seminar. He also contributes regularly to national dailies Hindustan, Jansatta, Prabhat Khabar and Rashtriya Sahara. Emil: <prakashlouis2010@gmail.com>

For the first time in history, the leaders of the world's major religions gathered together in the Vatican on 2nd December 2014 with the aim of eliminating modern slavery. This day being the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, a ceremony was held in the seat of the Pontifical Academy for Sciences in the Vatican's Casina Pio IV for the signing of the Declaration of Religious Leaders against Slavery. This solemn act follows the agreement signed on 17 March in the Vatican, established by the Global Freedom Network to eradicate, by 2020, modern forms of slavery and human trafficking. The Declaration was signed by Pope Francis, along with eminent Orthodox, Anglican, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu representatives.

The following is the text of Pope Francis' address, which he began by thanking all religious leaders for their commitment to assisting survivors of human trafficking, and all those present for their active participation in this act of fraternity, "especially for our brothers and sisters who suffer most". "Inspired by our confessions of faith, we are

gathered here today for an historical initiative and to take concrete action: to declare that we will work together to eradicate the terrible scourge of modern slavery in all its forms. The physical, economic, sexual and psychological exploitation of men, women and children that is currently inflicted on tens of millions of people constitutes a form of dehumanisation and humiliation”.

“Every human being, man woman, boy and girl is made in God’s image. God is the love and freedom that is given in interpersonal relationships and every human being is a free person destined to live for the good of others in equality and fraternity. Every person, and all people, are equal and must be accorded the same freedom and the same dignity. Any discriminatory relationship that does not respect the fundamental conviction that others are equal is a crime, and frequently an aberrant crime”.

“Therefore, we declare on each and every one of our creeds that modern slavery, in terms of human trafficking, forced labour and prostitution, and organ trafficking, is a crime against humanity. Its victims are from all walks of life, but are most frequently among the poorest and most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters. On behalf of all of them, our communities of faith are called to reject, without exception, any systematic deprivation of individual freedom for the purposes of personal or commercial exploitation; in their name, we make this declaration” [<http://www.anglicancentreinrome.org>].

The above presented paragraphs clearly and categorically spell out the fact that there is close connection between religions and human issues or social issues. World leaders gathering in Rome try to respond to one of the most pressing issues of our times indicates to the fact that religions and religious organizations are concerned about human well being.

Social development continues to be one of the most debated and most demanding aspects of world religions and religious institutions. Development usually deals with economic aspects of growth and well being. Social development on the other hand attempts to reduce social inequalities and addresses issues like social exclusion. By this, social development tries to ensure an inclusive and egalitarian growth. What

is important to take note of is that this is not limited to secular, civil and political institutions. Religions, religious leaders and religious institutions have from the very beginning been trying to respond to social issues of their times. Religious institutions are organizations which are motivated by religious principles that engage in various activities defined by these organizations. One of the areas in which these religious organizations engage in a big way is social development.

Organisations and institutions that work for social development in contemporary times are divided into faith based and secular. As the term indicates, faith based institutions are motivated by their particular faith or based on their faith emanating from their religious traditions. They are engaged in wide variety of activities starting from charity to development to faith related activities. In normal context these institutions are able to carry out their activities. But in multi religious context they could be seen as using social work and social development for religious conversion. In contrast, secular institutions are motivated and based on secular principles and are not part of any religious traditions. These are often based on humanitarian, egalitarian, ethical and non-religious principles. But these are not water tight compartments. Often they overlap and interrelated. This article tries to unfold the interface between religious institutions and social development.

Religions, Social Teachings and Social Practices

At every phase of human development, human beings review the attempts made by them, take stock of the progress made by them, and set up goals and targets for achieving greater progress and development. Significantly, this takes place at the individual and collective levels. At the global level, under the leadership of United Nations, governments of the world came together in the year 2000 to identify goals and fix up targets, which would be the guiding force for universal development. This has come to be known as Millennium Development Goal. The goals set up in 2000 were reviewed in 2015 and fulfillment of these goals is being pursued. While this is the case with national and international, secular and political organizations, religious institutions also try to address the issues of human development and well being of humanity as a whole.

The Quran recognizes basic economic and related rights for individuals. These include protection against defamation (surah 24:16) and against poverty (surah 22:7-8), as well as rights to a place of residence (surah 2:85), to dignity, to sustenance (surah 17:70), to asylum from oppression, and so forth (surah 4:97-99). The doctrine of social service, defined in terms of alleviating suffering and helping the needy, constitutes an integral part of Islamic teaching. Praying to God and other religious acts should always be complemented by active service to the disadvantaged (surah 2:188, 3:14, 4:29, 4:30, 4:33). The Quran promises prosperity in exchange for such social services. Accumulating wealth without recognizing the rights of the poor, however, is threatened with the harshest punishment in the hereafter and perceived as one of the main causes of the decay of societies.

Abdul Latif one of the Islamic writer states, "The economic system of life formulated by the Qu'ran, laying a special emphasis on the uplifting of the economically depressed, under which a state levy was to be collected from the rich for the relief of the poor, was rigidly enforced by the state. The exchequer of the state was considered to be the treasury of the people; the surplus, if any, accruing at the end of the year came back to the people in the form of annuities distributed on the basis of individual needs" [Nayyar Shamshi. 2003].

But religions do not stop at teaching or preaching about social issues and concerns. They also try to convert these into concrete actions. For example, Islam has founded national and international organizations to address social development issues. Islamic Relief Worldwide was set up in 1984 in United Kingdom. The motto of this organization is 'Faith Inspired Action'. Islamic Relief Worldwide has completed over three decades of fighting poverty and suffering in 2014. Though the challenges were complex, the demands acute and urgent in a year scarred by conflict, it continued to carry out developmental works. For over a quarter of a century Islamic Relief has served millions of people around the world, recognising that those with wealth have a duty to those with less. But as the world's largest not-for-profit organisation that is inspired by Islamic principles, it feels more than ever the heavy responsibility to humanity and the world around. From 2011, it embraced

a new and important strategic direction which responds to the emerging challenges that humanity faces in the battle against poverty, suffering, and social injustice [<http://www.islamic-relief.org>].

Similarly, at the national level Islamic Welfare Society was established in 1996 and founded the first school in 1999. The school was firstly started under a tin shade but later society acquired the land and built buildings that serve 1,200 girls students. It is completely a non-political organization. The objectives of this institution are: establish educational and religious establishments; install hand pumps in places with water shortage; provide technical and vocational training to the poor to provide employment opportunities; provide scholarship to poor children.

Catholicism has been in the forefront through its doctrines and programs in social development. Pope Paul the VI as early as 1960s seems to have had some deep insights into the crisis of development and insisted on the development of people. In his *Populorum Progressio* he argued, "The development of people has the Church's close attention, particularly the development of those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic diseases and ignorance; of those who are looking for a wider share in the benefits of civilisation and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are aiming purposefully at their complete fulfillment... Today the people in hunger are making a dramatic appeal to the peoples blessed with abundance. The Church shudders at this cry of anguish and calls each one to give a loving response of charity to this brother's cry for help" [<http://www.papalencyclicals.net>].

Further Pope Paul VI expected and urged the universal church and its Episcopal bodies to become a loving and serving church. The following 3 initiatives from his side highlight this fact: 1) Three synods held in 1969, 1971 and 1974 deal with issues that are related to human development, well being and dignity. 2) His address to the national and regional conferences of bishops encourages and directs them to give the poor and the oppressed central place in their pastoral concerns; 3) Following from these, he established the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace. This commission becomes the agent through which the church intervenes in justice and peace issues both within the church and in the world.

While justice and peace works of the Catholic Church are taken care by the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, the developmental works are undertaken by *Caritas Internationalis*. Spread over 200 countries, it focuses on relief, development and social service. The motto of Caritas which means charity is 'Ending Poverty, Promoting Justice and Restoring Dignity'. As a worldwide organization it responds to immediate relief to disaster response, development and dignity of people of all religions.

Another religious organisation of Catholic Church, the National Catholic Conference of Bishops of the United States, has the following to state with regard to its social concerns: "As individuals and as a nation, we are called to make a fundamental 'option for the poor'. The obligation to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and the powerless arises from the radical command to love one's neighbor as one's self. Those who are marginalized and whose rights are denied have privileged claims if society is to provide justice for all" (NCCB. 1986. 87).

Contrary to common thinking, Buddhism too has been involved in social development. The concept of development has incorporated additional choices such as potential freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect in Buddhism. Specific to Buddhism is the concept of selflessness (*anatma*), a notion that along with the idea of the individual's innate suffering (*duhkha*) involves feelings of universal compassion. After leading an ascetic life of renunciation for six years, the Buddha understood that detachment from the world could not be an ultimate solution. Drawing lessons from his years of solitude, he realized that in the process of self-negation, the sufferings of other creatures became more evident and compassion for other creatures immanent. Proposing a "middle path" between self-indulgence and self-renunciation, the Buddha's ultimate aim was to reach Nirvana, a realm in which all living things are free from pain and suffering. His devotion to compassion and solidarity later became the cornerstone of the Mahayana school of Buddhism, which urges individuals to work toward the salvation of others-a message that has been disseminated through-out the world by the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet.

Buddhism for Social Development Action (BSDA) is a Cambodian run NGO, established in 2005 in by seven monks. BSDA envisions a society where people are empowered to fully exercise their potential to live in dignity, peace and free of poverty. Stemming from this vision, BSDA's mission is to support and empower women, children and marginalized people in social development processes, especially health, education and livelihood promotion. This institution sees monks as social workers which was not the case some decades ago. A careful follower of contemporary happenings would remember the struggle for civil, political and human rights struggles undertaken by the monks in various countries.

Hinduism also like other religions has its own religious institutions which are engaged in social development. Hinduism considers *seva*, that is, service as one of the greatest of dharma, that is, moral duty of all Hindus. According to this belief, *seva* involves performing an act of kindness without expectation of reward. It is performed selflessly and without ulterior motive. The core belief in this is to sacrifice ones time and resources for the benefit of others without expectation of anything in return. Mahatma Gandhi spelt this out very clearly when he said, 'The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.'

One of the major religious organizations of Hinduism is *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)*, that is, the 'National Volunteer Force' which was founded in 1925. The mission of RSS was to organize the Hindus on nationalistic lines. Within RSS, there is the practice of having the meals in common irrespective of the caste differences. It was conceived primarily as an egalitarian vanguard of the Hindu nation. As per this objective, the world renouncer becomes an activist and engages in nation building. RSS has been functioning as one of the major religious institution of Hinduism. RSS launched the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in 1964. The aims of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad are: a) to consolidate and strengthen Hindu society, b) to protect and spread Hindu values, ethical and spiritual, and to make them relevant in contemporary society, and c) to establish and strengthen the links among Hindus living in different countries.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad established schools, orphanages, temples, etc. When the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babari Masjid controversy arose, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad claimed to protect the 'interest of Hindus'.

It is involved not only in religious activities; many other social activities were taken up by the Parishad. In 1983, there were about 3,000 active units in the country, spread over 302 districts. The Parishad is not only protecting the interests of Hindus, but it also takes to spread of Hinduism [Prakash Louis. 2000].

As stated above, not only at the level of individual religions but also at inter-religious domains there have been attempts to engage in addressing social development. The Third Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP III) meeting in Princeton in 1979 is the continuation of an important heritage. The first World Conference on Religion and Peace at Kyoto in 1970, and the second at Louvain in 1974, revealed on the international level a basic unity of purpose and goal amid diversities of religious belief, and widened the pathway of interreligious cooperation for peace. In spite of the scars of religious strife in some parts of the world, we perceive with joy a growing ferment of mutual understanding and respect among the followers of great religions. We learned in the first two assemblies of WCRP that while maintaining our commitment to our respective faiths and traditions, we may respect and understand the devotion of others to their faiths and religious practices.

We pledge ourselves to continue to grow in our mutual understanding and our work for peace, justice and human dignity. The Assembly is aware that we are approaching not only the turn of the century, but also a turning point in human history, with the survival of the world civilisation at stake. Therefore, we chose as our theme: Religion in the Struggle for world Community [Homer A. Jack. 1979: i-vii]. Thus, various religions at their own level and collectively have been trying to address social concerns and engage in social development. Without comparing them it would be pertinent to examine each of them on their own merit.

Development Debate

Development, definitionally and conceptually, denoted progress – social, economic, educational, cultural, scientific and technological – brought about by planned and programmed efforts to inaugurate an era of orderly and peaceful transformation of a society in a constitutionally desired direction. An attempt was made to interface between private and public sectors so as to ensure a mixed economy. Moreover, with nation building as primary objective, ensuring people's participation and community development was at the top of the agenda. Keeping some of these aspects in mind, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India remarked, "Community Development projects are of vital importance not so much for the material achievements that they would bring about, but much more so, because they seem to build up the community and the individual and to make the latter the builder of his own village centres and of India in the larger sense" [Jawaharlal Nehru. 1952]. The contagion of catching with the west, though was absent in the objectives of Jawaharlal Nehru, yet the course Indian development *pandits* took eliminated even the remote possibility of people's participation in the developmental processes and its benefits.

When we talk of development, we have to raise certain basic questions: What is development? Development by whom, for whom, at what cost? Who determines the parameters of development? Who pays for development? In the past, development was considered to be the most important component of nation building. Now the very concept, the process and the ideology of development itself have come under serious scrutiny. The debate also questions the known paradigms of development, raises doubts about the directions that development has taken, and decries some of the contradictions. Questions are also raised about the western paradigms of development which basically emerged from under-developing the now so called under-developed countries and regions. Since five decades of development has led to further under-development of the Dalits, the Tribals, the most backward castes, the minorities, women and children across these communities, not only the different paradigms of development but the utility of 'planned development' itself stands exposed.

A mapping of the extensive literature on development points to the following conception of development: a) Development is usually seen as economic growth. Here economic indicators are used to measure the growth or stagnation of economy of a country. b) Development is related to improvement in life chances. Many of the development agencies while talking about development refer to efforts to provide for the basic needs of people. This would refer to improved facilities in education, health, housing, social welfare etc. c) There are others who would consider development as growth and redistribution. From this perspective, development is equated with growth, equity and self-reliance. d) Finally, development is increasingly seen as a process of liberation from dependency and exploitation [K.L.Sharma.1986. 3-14].

To further unravel and explore the multifaceted realities of development, one needs to dovetail economic growth with social security and equality. Development now is not just related to technology, neither is it solely dependent upon human endeavor. It is intimately related to the extent of a group's command over resources, both human and material. It inevitably includes the process of inclusion of some and the exclusion of other groups. The overtly glittering and glamorous process, paradigm and outcome of development obscured the unequal and iniquitous socio-economic structure of India. While the skewed social structure determined the course of development, this structure in turn also got defined by development.

It is of seminal significance to state this historical fact that affluence and destitution, conspicuous consumption and continued starvation have become two sides of the same national and international process of centralised command over natural resources. The irony is that those who are engaged in production in the most difficult and arduous conditions are forced to starve. While those who are engaged in consumption continue to control the means of production. This divide has been accepted as fixed and final, ironically, in an age which swears by equity and justice and claims to be committed to eradication of all forms of disabilities which human beings through the ages have created for themselves.

Even a cursory glance at the impact of development informs us that the outcome of development has not been to any satisfactory level. The UN Conference on Trade and Development's (UNCTAD) 1999 annual report has examined the issues of the growing worldwide gap between the rich and poor as a result of globalization [UN Conference on Trade and Development's. 1999]. Some of its revelations are:

- Since 1994, the 200 richest people in the world have more than doubled their net worth to one trillion dollars that is one lakh crore dollar.
- Industrialized countries of Europe and US hold 97 per cent of all patents worldwide.
- The income gap between the richest fifth of the world's people and the poorest fifth increased from 30 to 1 in 1960 to 74 to 1 in 1997.
- The value of illegal drug trade was estimated at 400 billion dollars that is 40,000 crore dollars in 1995 about 8 per cent of world trade.
- In US in 1960 a Chief Executive Officer of a company earned on average income that was 40 times the average income of a factory worker. In 1993 it was 149 times more. The top 1 per cent has more wealth than the bottom 80 per cent.
- Among more than 600 professionals in the World Bank, the ratio of Economists to Social Scientists is 28 to 1. These economists with no hold on ground reality and also with no loyalty to their own country or society except their own self-interest, determine the destiny of more than 75 developing countries by using charts and graphs.
- A kilogram of salt that costs 50 *paise* 5 years ago now costs Rs. 6.50/-. This directly affects the common persons.

What is more disturbing is that over sixty years of planned development in India which is the case in many other countries has not really led to the development of people. Rather it has led to the underdevelopment of the people. This is due to the fact that in the development planning and execution, the people are not central. They are seen and treated as beneficiaries of development.

Social Development

Any debate on development has to seriously take into account the existing social conditions of the society. This is necessary because economic development does not take place in vacuum. They are directed and determined by the socio-political processes that are operative in the society. Since Indian society and polity is coloured by casteism, feudalism, patriarchal principles, development also is determined by these principles. The aim of social development is to effect social well being, that is, the ability of every human being to satisfy his or her basic needs and achieve a satisfactory quality of life within the environment of equality, social justice and human dignity. But if the social basis itself is unequal then development also will proceed in an unequal path.

The UNESCO's Position Paper for the World Summit on Social Development raises the argument that development is first and foremost social. It says, 'social dimensions is to be the starting point of development and should determine to a large extent the priorities of development policies'. The central trends of social development are:

- 1) Economic growth is an essential but not sufficient condition to ensure social development, and, strategies of development, in order to be more relevant, should focus on societies and not on economics.
- 2) Development should be human-centered and broad-based, effecting equal opportunities for all to participate fully and freely in economic, social, cultural and political activities.
- 3) People are the ends and not the means of economic progress and development.
- 4) Economic growth should subserve the cause of social development and ensure that development has a human face.
- 5) Social development and economic progress is mutually reinforcing; social development helps reduce economic inequalities and bolster economic growth, and equitable growth creates jobs and reduce poverty.

The UNDP Report says, 'the essence of human development is to place development at the service of people's well being rather than people at the service of development. In this perspective, human development implies empowering people to make their own choices. It also emphasizes the relevance of local values and knowledge as guidelines and tools for making these choices' [Human Development Report. 1994]. About sustainable development the report says, 'Sustainable development is development that not only regenerates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably; that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it; that empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It gives priority to the poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities and, providing their participation in decisions affecting them. It is development that is pro-poor, pro-nature, pro-jobs and pro-women and pro-children' [Human Development Report. 2001].

Before we proceed with our discussion, it is expedient to state this fact that development itself has undergone sea change, giving rise to a search for development discourse. Jan Nederveen Pieterse while deliberating about the trends in development theory states, "Globalization and regionalization are overtaking the standard unit of development, the nation or society. The conventional agent of development, the state, is being overtaken by the role of international institutions and market forces. The classic aim of development, modernization or catching up with advanced countries, is in question because modernization is no longer an obvious ambition. Modernity no longer seems so attractive in view of ecological problems, the consequences of technological change and many other problems. Westernization no longer seems attractive in a time of revaluation of local culture and cultural diversity. Several development decades have not measured up to expectations, especially in Africa and parts of Latin America and South Asia. The foundation of development studies - that developing countries form a special case - has been undermined by the politics of structural adjustment and the universalist claims of neoclassical economics" [Jan Nederveen Pieterse. 2001.1].

Over the time, development debate has brought home this message that development is multi-layered and multi-faceted. Added to this,

awareness has come that there are different dimensions to development. As stated above, though development is dealt within the parameters of economic growth, the social and political forces of a given time too have immense influence on development and growth. Moreover, development also takes place in a historical process. And finally, it is inter-linked with local, national and international forces and processes.

The above-presented arguments drive home the point that the development discourse has undergone major changes and have given rise to a serious search for alternatives. The Social Development Summit at Copenhagen in 1995 crystallized the world-debate on social development, with the participant governments agreeing to accord social development and human well being the highest priority both now and into the 21st century. The framework for action evolved there was:

- 1) place people at the centre of development, and economy at the service of human needs;
- 2) integrate economic and social policies to make them mutually supportive;
- 3) recognize that sound and broad-based economic policies are a necessary foundation to achieve sustained social development;
- 4) promote a more just distribution of income and access to resources through equity and equality of opportunity for people at all levels;
- 5) Recognize that empowering people to strengthen their own capacities is the main objective of development and its principal resources.

From the foregoing discussion it can be stated that development is a contentious issue subjected to variety of interpretations and analysis. Hence, the search for alternatives also need to be multi-faceted and broad based. The following are some of the alternatives that need to be sharpened in the course of discourse on development.

1. Adjustment context: one should begin with an informed analysis of the main dimensions of the crisis of the political economy of the country. If poverty has increased and multiplied due to development

in general and globalization, privatization and liberalization in particular, then the knowledge and the awareness of the masses are to be enabled to resist these forces.

2. Initiate changes: if the given socio-economic structures did not contribute in the well being of all the citizens then the alternative should be to change the main structures that generated the current crisis. These structures are unequal distribution of resources, faulty production, hierarchical social and power structure.
3. Objectives of development: the goals of economic development must not just be addressed to financial aspects like GDP, growth, income, commodities, investment, capital etc. But it should also take into account human objectives like food for all, end of malnutrition that affects mostly women and children, cater for basic needs etc.
4. We also need to redefine the foundational principles and practices that underline the alternatives. While we outright decry the national and global models we need to search for local and sustainable model of sustenance, development and redistribution. Local forms of development can be ensured only if people's participation is enhanced.
5. Need to counter this middle class myth that 'globalization has come to stay and there is no point in going against it'. This is detrimental to the entire human efforts to resist and protest against any anti-human policies and processes. The protest marches at Seattle, Doha etc are clear evidences of human spirit to resist manmade calamities.
6. Role of the NGOs is to ensure people's power to say no to the oppressive measures and mechanisms. This power of the people is systematically being eroded. And this is done in the subtlest form. Here the responsibility of the NGOs, activists, intellectuals and all concerned citizens becomes all the more crucial.
7. Make all out attempts to ensure Local Governments like Tribal Self-Rule and Panchayati Raj Institutions, and Women's organizations to identify resources, to mobilize resources and to manage resources [World Summit on Social Development. 1995].

Before we conclude this section, it is appropriate to delineate the various understandings of social development so as to locate our debate. As per development practioners, the following are some of the areas of collective work which would be interpreted as social development response by different segments engaged in these works. The first form of response is works of charity or social service. This mode of engagement is a response to the needs of those people in helpless situations, to bring immediate relief to the problems they face. Even though the immediate needs of these people are taken care of through such services, there is no change in the way they live as they continue to be dependent on others and on the existing social structures which are mostly oppressive or unjust. It is a response generated by the sympathetic attitude of providing relief to the suffering people. But even after a long period of such relief work or social services, the situation remains the same, and sometimes it even deteriorates. The beneficiaries continue to remain helpless and dependent on the benefactors. In this type of involvement, no serious attempt is made to analyze the existing situation and the root causes of the problems affecting the people. Hence, the activities remain confined to relief measures.

The second form of response is developmental work which is a response to the people in a helpless situation due to the lack of resources for a better living condition. Through developmental works individuals and groups are assisted, especially in the areas of both formal and non-formal education, health, housing, drinking water, irrigation and agriculture. Once the people are thus helped to improve their resources they become independent, as far as resources are concerned. But the structures that create the misappropriation of the resources are untouched, while individuals and groups develop themselves within the existing structures, without looking at these structures critically. Moreover, the question regarding the social position of the beneficiary of the service is not raised, as the objective behind the work is to be of service to whosoever is in need. Here too, as in the social service model, there is no analysis of the root causes. As a result, while some individuals and groups may benefit, the system of exploitation continues

The third form of response is social action. This is the direct involvement in the struggle of the oppressed and the marginalized for structural changes. By changing the structures, the attitudes, the relationships and the ways of life of both the oppressors and the oppressed are changed, and a society based on justice, equality and freedom is established. Thus, social action is an action to eliminate the unequal social stratification. It is a political action because it leads to the struggle for, and the participation in, power through self-determination and self-governance. It is a cultural action because it works towards putting an end to the dominating culture and establishing equal opportunities to all for self-expression. It is an economic action because it ensures that the resources are not controlled by a few.

It is important to add immediately that these are not linear process or these are mutually exclusive. In a given situation one of these forms of responses may be chosen so as to address the needs and issues of the people [JESA Evaluation Report. 1992].

Conclusion

The Third Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace calls all religions to go further and share a common confidence about the fruits of religious witness in the world. "*We trust that:*

- The power of active love, uniting men and women in the search for righteousness, will liberate the world from all injustice, hatred and wrong;
- Common suffering may be the means of making us realise that we are brothers and sisters, called to overcome the sources of that suffering;
- Modern civilisation may someday be changed so that neighbourly good will and helpful partnership may be fostered; and
- All religions will increasingly cooperate in creating a responsible world community.

In this conference, we turn to particular areas where peace and world community are at stake. [Homer A. Jack. 1979: i-vii]. Thus,

religions and religious institutions more and more have come to play dominant role in social issues and social development. This is a fact that all of them may not understand the issue in the same manner or respond in the same way. But they are concerned about social development and in their own way try to respond to this.

We can conclude this article with the perspectives provided by Pedro Arrupe and Dr. Ambedkar in terms of appropriate and action oriented responses. Pedro Arrupe speaking about Jesuit apostolate stated, "Creativity these days is indispensable. It breaths new forms into old apostolates and brings to light apostolates that are quite new. In its path it must overcome uncertainties, insecurity, resistance to various kinds and situations that are in a constant state of flux... there is a great desire to open up new roads for the apostolate". Thus, the Jesuits are called upon more than ever to creatively respond to the issues of the marginalised.

To conclude, religion is a great catalyst for social development and social development draws religious institutions to respond to the emerging needs. These two aspects of human life cannot be mutually exclusive. They are interlinked and interrelated. It is important to understand the mutual areas of interface and highlight those so as to ensure that religious institutions become responsible for social development and social development becomes integral part of religious institutions.

Dr. Ambedkar in his perceptive understanding of the state of depressed class Christians proposed the following as the yardstick to judge the social services of Indian Christianity. "It is necessary to bear in mind that Indian Christians are drawn chiefly from the Untouchables and to a less extent, from low ranking Shudra castes. The Social Services of Missions must therefore, be judged in the light of the needs of these classes". At this juncture of South Asian history, affirmative action for the welfare of the marginalised and upholding the rights of the weaker sections is emerging as the national and regional agenda. Hence, it is imperative that the followers of great personalities of South Asia like ..., Muzibur Rahaman, Ambedkar, Birsa Munda, Siddhu, Phule, Periyar, Gandhi, Jinna ... and others seriously search for alternatives that would

reduce the marginalisation of the poor and vulnerable and ensure their rights both as children of God and citizens of the nations of South Asia [Prakash Louis. 2014].

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Buddhist Values, Action for Sustainability and the Earth Charter

Joan Anderson

This article introduces the voices of members of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI), who are engaged in environmental activism in various fields and countries around the world. Joan Anderson currently works for the Soka Gakkai International Office of Public Information in Tokyo, Japan, where she is responsible for liaison with the international media. She has also been involved in the SGI's environmental education initiatives. Email: <anderson@soka.jp>

Introduction

Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a community-based Buddhist association with over 12 million members in 192 countries and territories around the world. Its members practice Nichiren Buddhism, based on the Lotus Sutra of Shakyamuni Buddha. The key message of the Lotus Sutra is that Buddhahood is a state of life all can develop, the highest expression of our shared humanity characterized by the qualities of courage, wisdom and compassion.

The Soka Kyoiku Gakkai was founded in Japan in 1930 by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) and Josei Toda (1900-58) as an association of teachers promoting child-centered, value-creating education. Makiguchi and Toda then encountered Nichiren Buddhism and found that its positive view of unlimited human potential matched their educational approach. The group's philosophy directly opposed that of the militaristic government of the time, which used education to mold obedient servants of the state, and in 1943, Makiguchi and Toda were imprisoned for *Lèse-majesté*. Makiguchi died in prison, and Toda was released just before the end of the war. He rebuilt the Soka Gakkai

and expanded its role as a grassroots lay Buddhist organization. In the chaos and destruction of post-war Japan, the Lotus Sutra's message of empowerment and personal transformation was highly appealing, and soon membership grew to over one million.

The Soka Gakkai continued to grow through the 1970s and 1980s, and now its membership in Japan is around 10 million. Under the leadership of its third president Daisaku Ikeda, the Soka Gakkai International was formed in 1975, and there are now affiliated SGI organizations in 94 countries and territories. Ikeda's writings outline ways of applying Buddhist values in today's world and provide inspiration to SGI members.

For SGI members, Buddhism is a practical philosophy that inspires and empowers individuals to become active in creating a better and more peaceful world. They use the term "human revolution" to describe how by developing their own inner qualities of courage, compassion and wisdom, they are able to become active and engaged in contributing to their local communities.

SGI also promotes peace, culture and education through a range of grassroots initiatives together with a range of partner organizations.

In this article I introduce the voices of members of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) who are engaged in environmental activism in various fields and countries around the world. These case studies are taken from the SGI website (www.sgi.org). In analyzing what shapes SGI members' activism, I quote from these case studies to show how their involvement has been shaped by their Buddhist values, beliefs and practice.

The Principles of Nichiren Buddhism

Nichiren (1222–82) is a controversial figure in the history of medieval Japanese Buddhism, who dared to challenge those who he felt misrepresented the message of Buddhism. His image is not necessarily that of a passionate environmentalist.

To individual SGI members, however, repeated study of his writings and his life reveals him as an appealing character, emotional and

passionate, erudite and thorough. His belief in the essential message of the Lotus Sutra, that the Buddha nature exists in all life, is an optimistic one that gives people hope.

Professor Carlos Rubio of the Complutense University of Madrid, who recently translated the writings of Nichiren into Spanish, has described him in the following way:

“Nichiren, in my view, is a unique and notable figure among religious leaders. In translating his writings into Spanish, I was deeply moved by his humane qualities and behavior. Japanese society at that time was feudalistic and strongly conformist, and it was common for the religious schools and their leaders to ingratiate themselves with those wielding power and authority. Nichiren, however, went directly against this tendency. . . . More than simply transcending the powerful cultural ethos of his time that held individuals back from speaking out against the norms of society, Nichiren was willing to continually risk his life to voice the truth as he saw it. If I were to attempt to encapsulate Nichiren’s character in a single phrase, I would characterize it as ‘the spirit of challenge.’”¹

To SGI members, this “spirit of challenge” is a key part of Nichiren’s legacy. While Nichiren believed that he was living at the start of the age of the Latter Day of the Law, or Mappo, his outlook was by no means fatalistic or gloomy.

Nichiren’s focus was on this world and equipping people with the spiritual resources needed to survive and even thrive within it. To him, Shakyamuni Buddha was not a remote figure but an exemplary human being. As he said: “The purpose of the appearance in this world of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, lies in his behavior as a human being.”²

And while human beings were his audience and his main focus, his way of viewing the world was naturally a non-dualistic one that did not

¹Carlos Rubio, “A Spirit of Challenge,” *SGI Quarterly* (Jan 2014), p. 4.

² *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (WND), Vol. 1 (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), p. 852.

allow for any separation between life and its environment. He writes: "Life at each moment encompasses the body and mind and the self and environment of all sentient beings in the Ten Worlds as well as all insentient beings in the three thousand realms, including plants, sky, earth, and even the minutest particles of dust. Life at each moment permeates the entire realm of phenomena and is revealed in all phenomena."³

If one believes, or even tries to believe, that all life has intrinsic value, then it is likely one will act, or try to act, in a way consistent with this view. A lack of awareness of the interrelatedness and inseparability of one's own life and those of others - human or otherwise - is more likely to be linked to justifying discriminatory attitudes and destructive behavior toward others and the environment.

As one indication of SGI members' perspectives on this issue, a survey of SGI-USA members carried out in 1997 by Phillip Hammond and David Machacek found that 81% of respondents agreed with the statement that "Nature is spiritual or sacred in itself," against 24% in the USA General Social Survey, adjusted for age.⁴

Buddhism stresses three kinds of relationships - those between humans and nature, those between human beings and the relationship with oneself. As Nichiren Buddhists, SGI members consider human beings and the environment to be interconnected at the deepest level, inextricably linked and interdependent.

Nichiren wrote: "... if the minds of living beings are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land. There are not two lands, pure and impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds."⁵ Changing one's "mind" then becomes the key challenge for Buddhist practitioners.

³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴ Philip Hammond and David Machacek, *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 130.

⁵ WND, Vol.1, p. 4.

To quote a young woman SGI member in Côte d'Ivoire, Africa, working at the Ivorian Antipollution Center (CIAPOL): "Buddhism teaches the concept of oneness of self and environment, the process whereby the mutually interrelated human life and its environment operate together in a creative way. This made me realize that the health of the environment depends upon a change in the awareness of each individual." (Aurélié Neame Koueli)⁶

The transformation SGI members are aiming for is the development of what is known as the "greater self", emulating the Mahayana Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva, continually strengthening their compassion and taking action to alleviate the sufferings of others. In today's world, the bodhisattva's embrace needs to widen to be big enough to include not just other human beings but the entire planet.

A member of SGI-Korea engaged in an effort to clean up a local river reflects: "As I chant every night upon returning home from a day of volunteer work, I feel a deep sense of fulfillment, which in turn becomes a source of energy to continue my efforts. As Nichiren Daishonin states in his writings, 'If one lights a fire for others, one will brighten one's own way' . . . It is deeply rewarding to know that the small step of deciding to do something positive, and my efforts to convey to others the spirit of coexisting with nature, have led to a revival of the environment and the lives of those around me." (Shin Won-suk)⁷

SGI members call this process of inner change human revolution. In the words of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda: "A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind."⁸

A young woman member of SGI-USA working at the interface of public health and ecology, with experience in Africa and Latin America

⁶ <http://www.sgi.org/people-and-perspectives/change-begins-within-myself.html>

⁷ <http://www.sgi.org/people-and-perspectives/my-small-step.html>

⁸ *The Human Revolution: Book One volumes 1-6* (Santa Monica, California: World Tribune Press, 2004), viii.

comments: “As challenges arose, my parents taught me about the Buddhist concept of the oneness of life and its environment, which explains how our lives and our environment are inextricably connected. At times when I am struggling, it is always easier to blame external circumstances; however, the empowering aspect of this teaching is that a profound change in ourselves gives rise to a change in our environment.” (Amy Yomiko Vittor)⁹

The interconnectedness of all life, described in Nichiren Buddhism as “engi” (Jpn.) or dependent origination, is starkly visible in global problems such as climate change and deforestation.

SGI members strive to bring such Buddhist perspective and values directly into their approach to their work.

To quote another SGI member working as a city planner in Hong Kong: “Buddhist philosophy, based on respect and concern for all life, accords closely with the concept of sustainable development . . . It means creating social harmony and equality, protecting the environment and ensuring economic prosperity. Buddhism itself is essentially about bringing all these elements of life into balance, whether on a personal level or a community or global level . . . What this means fundamentally is that we cannot build happiness or prosperity upon the destruction or disregard of other life, including the natural environment, for ultimately we ourselves will suffer the consequences.” (Fung Ling)¹⁰

The Founding Spirit of SGI

The way Nichiren Buddhism is interpreted and realized within SGI is derived from the perspectives of its founding presidents. Their examples and commentary on Nichiren’s writings and the Lotus Sutra provide an ethical framework for SGI members.

Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, founder of Soka Kyoiku Gakkai, the predecessor of Soka Gakkai and the SGI, was an educator and an

⁹<http://www.sgi.org/people-and-perspectives/an-inextricable-connection.html>

¹⁰<http://www.sgi.org/people-and-perspectives/planning-for-a-city-a-buddhist-perspective.html>

expert on geography. His book *A Geography of Human Life* elucidates in great detail the fundamental influence of the local environment on people's lives.

"The relationship between human beings and the earth is very complex, but it is not something remote from our daily lives. Rather, the people/earth relationship is involved in everything we do, and it affects every aspect of our experience..."¹¹

To quote Andrew Gebert and Monte Joffee in a paper titled "Value Creation as the Aim of Education: Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Soka Education":

"Rather than merely examine physical geography, Makiguchi probed the dynamic relationship between geography and the psychological aspects of human life. ... Makiguchi held that education based on an awareness of the connections between human life and the natural and social environment could help develop the moral character of students."¹²

Makiguchi encountered Nichiren Buddhism relatively late in life, but found its values and philosophy matched perfectly his concern to save people from suffering and create the greatest positive value. He became convinced that the spirituality of Nichiren's teachings was aligned with rational, scientific, universal laws; and was meant to be fully engaged and integrated with the realities of life in society. He wrote: "Other than freeing people and the world from suffering, what meaning could there be for the existence of religion in society?"¹³

¹¹ Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, *A Geography of Human Life*, ed. Dayle M. Bethel (San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press, 2002), p. 11.

¹² Andrew Gebert and Monte Joffee, "Value Creation as the Aim of Education: Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Soka Education" in *Ethical Visions of Education: Philosophies in Practice* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2007), p. 68.

¹³ *Makiguchi Tsunesaburo Zenshu* [The Complete Works of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi]. Vol. 5 (Tokyo: Daisan Bunmeisha, 1981–96), p. 356.

The philosophy and practice of Nichiren Buddhism emphasize the supreme value of life and stress the possibility of positive change and infinite development of individual human potential. This explains its appeal to the disempowered in post-war Japanese society, and why the Soka Gakkai grew extremely rapidly in the two decades following 1945, initially under the leadership of second president Josei Toda, who saw his mission as “eliminating misery from the world.”

Much of the focus in the organization’s early days in Japan was on enabling “the poor and the sick” to get their lives on a more stable footing.

This focus on worldly flourishing in the Soka Gakkai and SGI has sometimes led to accusations that materialism is being encouraged. The perspective of Nichiren Buddhism is that the physical and spiritual dimensions of life are ultimately inseparable. Human beings are justified in seeking living standards which provide for basic needs in order to alleviate human suffering (consonant with the Buddhist value of compassion) and to open to everyone the concrete experience of dignity (the value of respect for the inherent dignity of life). Many SGI members around the world face enormous difficulties due to poverty and exclusion, and we believe that such issues must be tackled on an individual and societal level.

However, of course, untrammelled desire, or greed, cannot lead to sustainable development. In SGI, as for all Buddhists, greed is identified as one of “three poisons” which are the fundamental sources of human suffering. Nichiren Buddhism however teaches that we should not be enslaved by our personal desires, but should direct and transform them toward more inclusive desires, say, for the happiness of our community and the flourishing of the broader community of life. In this light, desires can be a vital stimulus for creating positive value.

Inevitably, it is what SGI members refer to as the “inconspicuous benefits” of their practice that are the most valuable and enduring, what Nichiren called “the treasures of the heart.” As he writes in one of his letters, “More valuable than treasures in a storehouse are the treasures of the body, and the treasures of the heart are the most

valuable of all. From the time you read this letter on, strive to accumulate the treasures of the heart!"¹⁴

SGI members and organizations also hold that it is important that societies adopt a more balanced set of values which stress the cultural, social and spiritual aspects of life alongside the economic and material. This is the main reason SGI has endorsed and promoted the Earth Charter as an expression of holistic, shared values for sustainability. It provides common ground on which SGI can stand, together with other individuals, faith groups and civil society partners.

Concerning the challenge of balancing material well-being and concern for the planet, SGI members particularly relate to the following phrase in the Preamble of the Earth Charter: "We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more."¹⁵

According to a survey of SGI members in the UK undertaken in 1990, the majority of SGI members identified as "pure post-materialists" – 75%, as against 21% of the UK population adjusted for age. Only 25% were categorized as pure or mixed materialists, against 49% of the UK population.¹⁶

In SGI-USA, in a survey undertaken in 1997, a lower percentage, 45% identified as pure post-materialist, against 11% in the general population, yet here also only 25% of SGI-USA members were categorized as pure or mixed materialist, against 69% of the population.¹⁷

If we examine how the SGI engages in sustainability in today's world, the writings of SGI President Ikeda are a key influence. Every year since 1983, he has written a peace proposal that offers Buddhist-inspired ways of looking at current problems and concrete suggestions for ways forward in dealing with them.

¹⁴ WND, Vol.1, p.851

¹⁵ <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-theCharter.html>

¹⁶ Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 143.

¹⁷ P. Hammond and D. Machacek, op. cit., p. 116.

In these and other proposals, environmental themes have been a major focus, starting with a proposal calling for environmental protection he authored in 1978. In a paper on “The Environmental Problem and Buddhism” published by the Institute of Oriental Philosophy in 1990, he states: “External desertification of the planet corresponds precisely with spiritual desertification of the force of life. Human relations with nature are intimately bound up in interpersonal relations and with the relationship of the self and its inner life. The egoism of human beings whose internal environments are polluted and desolate invariably manifests itself in domination, deprivation and destruction in the external environment.”¹⁸

Ikeda consistently stresses the importance of education and, in particular, education aimed at empowerment. In a proposal authored at the time of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, he called for the establishment of a UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and commented: “... in the case of environmental issues, which can be so vast and complex . . . information and knowledge alone can leave people wondering what this all means to them, and without a clear sense of what concrete steps they can take. To counter such feelings of powerlessness and disconnection, education should encourage understanding of the ways that environmental problems intimately connect to our daily lives. Education must also inspire the faith that each of us has both the power and the responsibility to effect positive change on a global scale.”¹⁹

While in some more extreme approaches to ecology, human beings are perceived as unwelcome parasites causing nothing but damage to the Earth and other forms of life, the SGI’s outlook is that responsible and awakened human beings committed to creating positive value can be the most promising protagonists of change.

¹⁸ Daisaku Ikeda, “The Environmental Problem and Buddhism,” *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 3 (1990), p.8.

¹⁹ “The Challenge of Global Empowerment: Education for a Sustainable Future,” <http://www.sgi.org/sgi-president/proposals/environmental-proposal.html>

This positive perspective was reiterated in the proposal Ikeda authored in 2012 on the occasion of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the Rio+20 Conference: "Although physical resources are finite, human potential is infinite, as is our capacity to create value. The real significance of sustainability is . . . as a dynamic concept in which there is a striving or competition to generate positive value and share it with the world and with the future."²⁰

A German SGI member working in Namibia in fisheries management echoes this perspective in her comments on how becoming a Buddhist has directly influenced her approach to her work: "Western thought tends to regard human beings and nature as separate - to the extent that some believe that human beings are bad for nature. In contrast, Buddhism regards life and its environment as deeply interconnected . . . For me, the Buddhist concept of the oneness of self and the environment and the notion that nothing can exist in isolation provide the philosophical basis for my research toward a holistic approach to fisheries management that can help bring human society back into harmony with nature."²¹ (Barbara Paterson)

Awareness-raising Initiatives

On promoting the practical application of Buddhist philosophy, the SGI has consistently carried out public education and awareness-raising activities that are often centered around exhibitions.

These have often originated in support of UN initiatives. At the time of the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, SGI-Brazil hosted an exhibition titled "The Amazon - Its Environment and Development" which was eventually seen by 700,000 people across Latin America.

In 2001, based on a proposal from SGI President Ikeda and in partnership with other NGOs, Soka Gakkai representatives put forward the idea for a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development to a

²⁰ "For a Sustainable Global Society: Learning for Empowerment and Leadership," <http://www.sgi.org/assets/pdf/environmentproposal2012.pdf>

²¹ <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/members-stories/conserving-the-benguelas-abundance>

Japanese NGO forum meeting prior to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002.

In 2002, for the WSSD, SGI also created a film called “A Quiet Revolution” and an exhibition “Seeds of Change: The Earth Charter and Human Potential” in partnership with the Earth Charter. The key approach taken in SGI’s educational tools is to make the issue real and yet not overwhelming. The formula “Learn, Reflect, Empower” is used, and the final section of any exhibition shares examples of so called ordinary individuals who have succeeded in taking action for change, in line with SGI members’ core belief that one individual’s actions can definitely make a difference.

In the latest exhibition on an environment-related theme, “Seeds of Hope: Visions of sustainability, steps toward change,” created jointly by SGI and the Earth Charter International, out of 24 panels, 8 spotlight individuals who have taken action to initiate change. Some of these are individuals who are already well-known, such as Wangari Maathai or Hazel Henderson, and others are less familiar examples.

The SGI is active at several different levels in contributing to sustainability. The SGI has UN liaison offices where its representatives contribute to global discussions and debates on, for example, the new Sustainable Development Goals that are part of the Post-2015 Agenda.

There are also national level initiatives in many countries from tree planting to training of teachers. In an initiative that grew out of the first Earth Charter events held there in 2000, SGI Malaysia has recycling activities, clean-ups, and a whole month of local activities aimed at raising awareness of environmental issues and the need for personal responsibility in April every year. In Brazil, SGI carries out very extensive activities related to sustainability. Most visible of these is the Amazon Ecological Conservation Center (renamed the Soka Institute Amazon Environmental Research Center in 2016) near Manaus which opened in 1993. The center has restored degraded areas of forest, with the emphasis on planting methods that enable the human population and the forest to coexist, and runs extensive programs of environmental education. It also works with local indigenous

communities to help them develop their own livelihoods in sustainable ways.

Brazil-SGI (BSGI) also promotes school garden projects and recycling activities with public school teachers and students' parents as part of the Makiguchi Education Action program created by its Education Department. This has reached approximately 300 schools in several Brazilian cities. At the local level in many countries we are often engaged in tree planting, cleaning up parks in towns, villages and so on.

The SGI works with various partners at different local, national and international levels. One partnership that has now been ongoing for nearly 15 years is one with the Earth Charter movement. The Earth Charter provides a universal expression of ethical principles to foster sustainable development, and its values are consonant with those of the SGI.

The SGI-affiliated Boston Research Center (subsequently renamed the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue) held a series of consultations on the draft text of the Earth Charter, and SGI-USA also held such consultations. As the text was being finalized through dialogue in the late 1990s, there was a concern that it was not attracting much attention in Asia, and Earth Charter Commissioner Mikhail Gorbachev requested SGI to become involved in raising awareness of the Charter through the large SGI grassroots network in Asia.

This partnership has been a very beneficial one, in that it has brought SGI new encounters with like-minded individuals and groups. Importantly, it has also enabled communication of SGI's values in language that is universal and not specifically Buddhist.

There is considerable resonance between the Earth Charter's message and the basic outlook of SGI as expressed in the SGI Charter. Its poetic and deeply spiritual expression of human responsibility and agency, interconnectedness and global outlook fits exactly with SGI's approach.

Ikeda has consistently promoted the Earth Charter in his annual peace proposals, for instance in 2002, stating: "The Earth Charter is

not limited in its concerns to environmental issues but contains important language related to social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence and peace. In this sense, it is a comprehensive statement of the norms and values required for effective global governance. It may be considered a guideline for humanity in the twenty-first century.”²²

Some individual SGI members were so inspired by the message of the Earth Charter that they became deeply engaged, initiating their own projects and even their own civil society organizations or NGOs inspired by its message.

Individual Contribution

Overall, however, where the SGI is contributing most to sustainability in my view, is through individual members and their contributions in their communities and their workplaces. This is where the philosophy of the SGI becomes a reality.

Based on analysis of the case studies presented on the SGI website, I have attempted to summarize the common elements in the process of change that individuals seem to undergo as a result of applying their daily practice and the values of Buddhism as taught within SGI. The individual efforts of these SGI members directly exemplify “human revolution” in action - the never-ending process of growth and development of the greater self on which SGI members ideally embark through their practice.

An SGI-UK member working to prevent illegal logging describes this process: “I knew that change had to start from me. I began to develop the attitude that my life isn’t just about surviving or solving problems that arise, it’s about taking a proactive approach to life, where I set out to do something and continue come what may, focusing all the time on my long-term aims, seeing setbacks in their longer-term context.”²³ (Julie Bygraves)

²² The Humanism of the Middle Way: Dawn of a Global Civilization,” <http://www.sgi.org/assets/pdf/peace2002.pdf>

²³ <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/members-stories/top-20/a-piece-of-ourselves.html>

This approach is described in the book *Chanting in the Hillsides: The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin in Wales and the Borders* by Jeaneane and Merv Fowler as follows: “Enlightenment in Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism is not the suspension of desires, but involvement in the world, engaged living - in the true spirit of the bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism. It is those who can experience their greater selves who can effectuate greater global peace and harmony....”²⁴

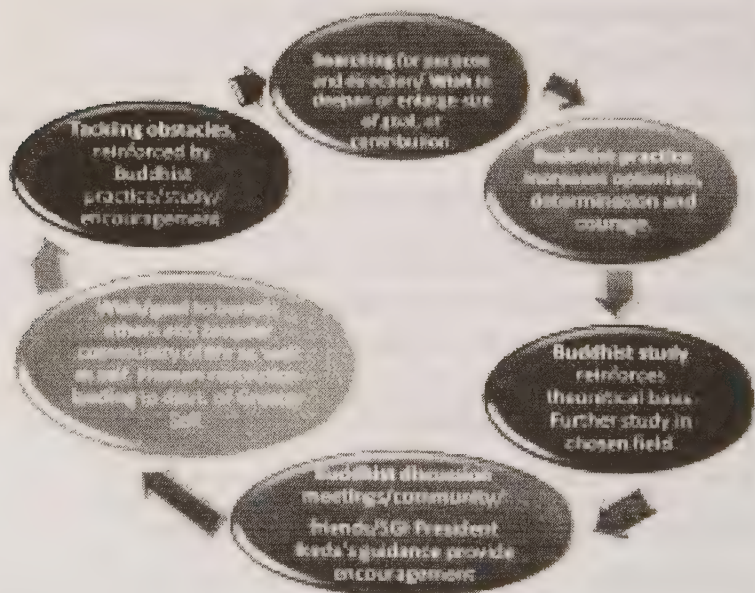
Analyzing these accounts by SGI members engaged in the field of sustainability, it was clear that individual practitioners tend to become more engaged in contribution as their Buddhist practice develops.

The common threads identified in these stories are as follows:

- Initial lack of clarity over direction
- Lack of belief in oneself and the possibility of being able to make a difference
- Start of application of Buddhist practice and study
- Challenging own circumstances
- Broadening compassion and feeling of connection with or responsibility for the environment
- Beginning of hope/dream involving something to do with protecting environment and contributing to community
- Realization that change has to start from within oneself
- Gradually overcoming sense of own powerlessness
- Study/training
- Starting local/with challenge in front of one
- Inspiration from Buddhist words and practice
- Encountering obstacles on the way

²⁴ Jeaneane Fowler and Merv Fowler, *Chanting in the Hillsides: The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin in Wales and the Borders* (Eastbourne and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), p. 81.

- Drawing on encouragement from other SGI members, Buddhist principles and SGI President Ikeda's guidance
- Deepening one's determination to contribute
- Increasing size of one's dream/goal
- Continuing this process of increasing the size of one's contribution indefinitely, inspired by Buddhist practice, study and guidance/support from other SGI members



Each individual's journey seemed to be best imagined as a "cycle" of ever-deepening Buddhist study and practice leading to increased contribution.

These are all individual journeys from lack of hope and disempowerment to empowerment and action. They illustrate

determination to take responsibility for initiating change and refusal to give up hope in spite of all setbacks.

I believe it is in this personally-felt “spirit of challenge” that the real legacy of Nichiren and the spirit of the SGI are to be found.

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Christian Faith and Racial Relations in the United States of America

Leo D. Lefebure

This article reviews the troubled and tragic history of Christian faith and racial relations in America. While much progress has been made over the years, the current turmoil concerning racial relations in America demonstrates that these issues are far from being resolved. Dr. Leo D Lefebure is Professor and Matteo Ricci Chair in the Department of Theology, Georgetown University, Washington DC. He has published his latest in 2013 *True and Holy: Christian Scripture and Other Religions*. And Dr. Leo co-authored with Peter Feldmeier in the book *The Path of Wisdom: A Christian Commentary on the Dhammapada*, published by Eerdmans Publishing Company and Peeters in 2011. Email: <ll253@georgetown.edu>

Christian faith has played multiple and conflicting roles in the tortured history of racial relations in colonial North America and later in the United States of America. In principle, Christian faith calls its followers to respect every human life as created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27). Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke makes clear that the command to love one's neighbor as oneself applies to members of diverse communities that are disrespected or despised (Lk 10:25-37). Yet from colonial times to the present, Christians of European descent in North America have all too often embraced racist perspectives and have engaged in forms of racial injustice ranging from murder and rape to segregation to more subtle forms of disrespect and exclusion. While much progress has been made over the years, the current turmoil concerning racial relations in America demonstrates that these issues are far from being resolved. This essay will review the troubled and tragic history of Christian faith and racial relations in America.

Colonial Period

In colonial North America, Europeans, Africans, and American Indians encountered one another in an unprecedented situation, often in situations of conflict and violence. As a result of the new contacts, countless American Indians died of unfamiliar diseases brought by European settlers, including smallpox, measles, mumps, chicken pox, and influenza.¹ In the wake of the demographic collapse, Europeans imported enslaved Africans to provide needed labor.² Earlier generations of American historians traditionally highlighted the contributions of English settlers who came to Virginia and New England and downplayed the roles of American Indians and enslaved Africans in shaping the new society. More recently, historians have recognized the vital importance of what happened to the Indian and African populations.³ Historian Alan Taylor comments on the crucial role that race played in shaping identities in colonial America: "Over time, race loomed larger - primarily in British America - as the fundamental prism for rearranging the identities and the relative power of the many peoples in the colonial encounters. A racialized sorting of peoples by skin color into white, red, and black was primarily a product, rather than a precondition of colonization."⁴ He stresses the unimaginable scale of the suffering of the victims of this process: "More than minor aberrations, American Indian deaths and African slaves were fundamental to colonization. The historian John Murrin concludes that 'losers far outnumbered winners' in 'a tragedy of such huge proportions

¹ Daniel K. Richter, *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Past* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 143-47.

² Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

³ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown and CO., 1993); Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, ReVisioning American History Series (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

⁴ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies*, The Penguin History of the United States, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), xii.

that no one's imagination can easily encompass it all."⁵ From colonial times to the American Civil War, white North Americans developed a form of racialized slavery that is one of the cruelest forms of oppression in all of human history.

As British settlers constructed new forms of identity at a distance from the class system of their homeland, they increasingly turned to racial discrimination to justify their domination over American Indians and Africans. This resulted in greater equality for lower class whites, but it condemned generations of American Indian and African Americans to a systematically subordinate position: "British colonial elites gradually accepted a white racial solidarity based upon subordinating 'blacks' and 'reds.' Once race, instead of class, became the primary marker of privilege, colonial elites had to concede greater social respect and political rights to common white men."⁶ As British colonists developed the rhetoric of freedom and equality, they intended it to apply to free white males, not to American Indians or enslaved Africans; nonetheless, the claims of universal human freedom and equality for all would remain a challenge for all later generations, down to the present.

Christian faith played a variety of sometimes contradictory roles in the racialized society of North America. Many European Christians viewed American Indians as following abominable religious practices. For example, Puritans in New England saw the indigenous inhabitants as barbarous savages practicing cannibalism, as lacking humanity and thus having no legal claim to the land they in which they had always lived.⁷ Puritans saw themselves as the new Israelites on an "errand in the wilderness," and thus viewed New England as their Promised Land, with the American Indians cast in the role of the Canaanites. While they sought to evangelize the American Indians, Puritans also wanted to be rid of them, which on occasion led to massacres of civilian populations: "The pressure of demographic expansion, coupled with

⁵ Ibid., xi.

⁶ Ibid., xiii.

⁷ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 38.

the psychological fear of acculturation, moved the Puritans toward a policy of exterminating the Indians or, at best, reducing them to a semicaptive status on strictly and narrowly delimited reservations (called, at that time, praying towns)."⁸

While Christian faith could be abused to justify coercion in colonial America, it could also challenge such oppressive practices and open a vision of a more equitable future, as in the case of Roger Williams, who from the beginning dissented from the Puritan approach. Surveying the bitter history of religious conflicts in Europe since the time of Constantine, he concluded that imposing religious loyalties was a violation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Williams interpreted Jesus's parable of the wheat and the weeds (Mt 13:24-30) as forbidding Christians to attack those with whom they disagreed.⁹ Williams daringly judged the Emperor Constantine, who legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire, to have been more of a danger than his predecessor Nero, who had persecuted Christians. Under Nero, Christians had heroically suffered and died; with Constantine, Christians took power, became corrupted, and began to impose Christianity by governmental authority.¹⁰ Williams also argued that it was unjust for the King of England to pretend to have the right to give away lands where Native Americans had lived for centuries. For Williams, the fact that Native Americans had different religious practices did not deprive them of their right to their homeland.¹¹ In 1635 Williams was banished from Massachusetts as a dissenter. The following year he moved south, where he purchased land from Native Americans and established a new community, Rhode Island, as a "haven for the cause of conscience," founded on the principle of religious liberty for all. Even though his establishment of religious freedom or, in his phrase, "soul liberty" was fiercely opposed

⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁹ James P. Byrd, Jr. *The Challenges of Roger Williams: Religious Liberty, Violent Persecution, and the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), 9.

¹⁰ Byrd, 114-115.

¹¹ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams, Lives and Legacies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24-26

by the Puritans in Massachusetts, his example would stand as an inspiration for later Americans.

Regarding the introduction of slavery into the New World, many Christians interpreted the so-called curse of Ham in the book of Genesis as a basis for the enslavement and subordination of all persons of African descent (Gen 9:20-27).¹² According to Genesis, after the great flood Noah planted a vineyard, made wine, drank too much, and lay down naked in his tent, apparently in a drunken stupor. His son Ham looked upon him and then told his brothers Japheth and Shem about the situation. Respecting their father, Japheth and Shem took a garment and reportedly walked backwards into the tent to cover their father without looking upon him in his naked, shameful state. When Noah had recovered and learned of what happened, he cursed, not Ham, but rather Canaan, the son of Ham: "Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers." He also said, 'Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave' (Gen 9:25-27). Later generations identified Shem as the ancestor of Semitic peoples in the Middle East, Ham as the ancestor of Africans, and Japheth as the ancestor of Europeans.

In the text of Genesis, there is no stated reason for Canaan to be cursed for the misconduct of his father Ham. More importantly, the passage does not explicitly authorize what white Americans interpreted it to mean: there is no indication that all the descendants of Ham and Canaan are to be enslaved for centuries to come. Nonetheless, white Americans repeatedly identified themselves as the descendants of Japheth and cited this passage as justification for enslaving all persons of African heritage.¹³

¹² There was enslavement of American Indians as well, though the large majority of enslaved persons were of African descent. See Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2016).

¹³ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 496.

Not all American Christians agreed with this interpretation, and there soon developed a theological debate that would prove to be among the most important for American history. In 1700 Samuel Sewall, a Boston lawyer, pointedly noted that Noah's curse did not fall on Ham but rather on Canaan. Sewall argued the Canaan was not the ancestor of Africans at all but rather, as his name suggests, of the ancient Canaanites. Sewall stressed the decisive authority of the golden rule of Jesus as forbidding slavery.¹⁴ In response, John Saffin, another Boston lawyer, cited the precedents for slavery in the Hebrew Bible as alleged proof of its legitimacy. Saffin insisted that enslavement gave Africans the benefit of hearing the truth of Christian faith and accepting it.¹⁵ This debate continued for the next 150 years, with evangelical Protestants in particular probing questions of biblical hermeneutics and arguing over the principles for deciding which biblical texts had greater authority.¹⁶

For American Indians and African Americans, beginning of the First Great Awakening in the 1730s was a major moment when Christian faith began to appear as a liberating, live option. The preaching of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and many other Protestant leaders presented Christian faith as a vivid personal experience of recognition of sin and grace. In contrast to Europe, where established state churches were the norm, in North America the numerous Protestants of dissenting movements were dominant forces shaping society. The Great Awakening encouraged a focus on strong personal experience and a distrust of long established hierarchies. The challenge to established hierarchies was one factor shaping the context of the American Revolution against Great Britain.

The newfound religious enthusiasm was very appealing to the American Indian and African American populations that had traditionally been marginalized. American Indians came to participate in Christian worship services in unprecedented numbers. When American Indians

¹⁴ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 495.

¹⁵ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 495.

¹⁶ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 50.

accepted Christianity, they did not completely leave behind their earlier views and practices. Linford D. Fisher comments that “Indians had long incorporated new ideas and practical skills alongside old ones, often without intending to drop, remove, or alter the existing ones. This would strongly suggest that Natives, whether individually or communally, rarely ‘converted’ in some sort of totalizing way, as is often assumed.”¹⁷

The vivid emotions of the revival meetings appealed to enslaved Africans who could find a resonance with their African heritage, as Albert J. Raboteau comments: “Drawing upon the worship traditions of Africa, as well as those of revivalistic Christianity, the slaves created services that resembled the spirit-empowered ceremonies of their African ancestors. Both traditions assumed that authentic worship required an observable experience of the divine presence.”¹⁸ American Indians and African Americans could emerge as preachers inspired by their own religious experience. By the end of the eighteenth century, a tradition of African American Christianity was taking root. Often Christian communities were the only place in society where African Americans could exercise roles of leadership.

The Nineteenth Century

Many European Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw their nation as uniquely blessed by God with a divine mandate to spread freedom and democracy around the world. Many Americans went so far as to claim a millennial role for the United States as a “redeemer nation,” destined to bring freedom, democracy, and liberty to the entire world.¹⁹ The vision of peace would, however, sometimes require the might of arms to establish and defend it.

¹⁷ Linford D. Fisher, *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 88.

¹⁸ Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 45.

¹⁹ Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

In the nineteenth century American Indian and African American leaders pointed out that this exalted self-understanding was based on the oppression of other peoples, and they forcefully challenged the combination of racism and Christian faith. In 1831 Maria Stewart, an African American Christian leader who was an eloquent spokesperson for the rights of all, especially African American women, linked Christianity to the cause of freedom and challenged white Americans:

America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against Thee. . . You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God; for I am firmly persuaded, that he will not suffer you to quell the proud, fearless and undaunted spirits of the Africans forever; for in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you, and to pour out upon you the ten plagues of Egypt.²⁰

Two years later, in New England in 1833, a Methodist minister and theologian William Apress from the Pequot nation issued an analogous challenge to the racist assumptions of the white churches:

Now let me ask you, white man, if it is a disgrace for too eat, drink, and sleep with the image of God, or sit, or walk and talk with them. Or have you the folly to think that the white man, being one in fifteen or sixteen, are the only beloved images of God? Assemble all nations together in your imagination, and then let the whites be seated among them. . . Now suppose these skins were put together, and each skin had its national crimes written upon it-which skin do you think would have the greatest? I will ask one question more. Can you charge the Indians with robbing a nation almost of their whole continent, and murdering their women and children, and then depriving the remainder of their lawful rights, that nature and God require them to have?²¹

²⁰ Maria Stewart, cited by Raboteau, *Canaan Land*, 35.

²¹ William Apress, *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apress, a Pequot*, edited and with an Introduction by Barry O'Connell (Amherst,

Both American Indians and African Americans made sharp distinctions between authentic Christianity and what was being promoted by the dominant, racist European American leaders of the time. Most enslaved African Americans were not allowed to receive formal education, but they expressed a lively grasp of Christian faith in the spirituals. Often biblical images such as the freeing of the slaves in the Exodus or the crossing of the River Jordan were sung about as images of liberation from slavery in America. The great twentieth-century African American theologian Howard Thurman described the unshakable fundamental confidence of the spirituals: "God was the deliverer. . . . Daring to believe that God cared for them despite the cruel vicissitudes of life meant the giving of wings to life that nothing could destroy."²² The spirituals expressed faith in a God of freedom: "In God's presence at least there would be freedom; slavery is no part of the purpose or the plan of God. Man, therefore is the great enemy of man."²³ Often the spirituals expressed a double meaning, one that would be apparent to the slaveholder and the other that would be recognized by those in chains. In the spirituals, African Americans expressed their awareness that God was on their side: "They know from cruel experience that the Christian ethic has not been sufficiently effective in the life of the Caucasian or the institutions he controls to compel him to treat the Negro as a fellow human being. . . . The Christian ethic and segregation must forever be at war with each other."²⁴

James Cone notes that the greatest danger to enslaved African Americans was the destruction of their community. In the spirituals they faced this danger and expressed solidarity even in seemingly

MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), xiii; see also Philip F. Gura, *The Life of William Apess, Pequot* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

²² Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (1975; reprint, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1990), 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49-50

impossible situations: "They attended to the present realities of despair and loneliness that disrupted the community of faith. . . . Thus it is the loss of community that constitutes the major burden. Suffering is not too much to bear, if there are brothers and sisters to go down in the valley to pray with you."²⁵ Cone adds: "The actual physical brutalities of slavery were minor in comparison to the loss of the community. That was why most of the slave songs focused on 'going home.' Home was an affirmation of the need for community."²⁶ The spirituals reinterpreted the Bible from the perspective of those enslaved, trusting that God in some way shared in their suffering, affirmed their human dignity, and willed their liberation: "The theological assumption of black slave religion as expressed in the spirituals was that *slavery contradicts God, and God will therefore liberate black people*. All else was secondary and complemented that basic perspective."²⁷

After completing the narrative of his life, noted African American leader Frederick Douglass worried that readers might think he was rejecting religion altogether, and so he offered a clarification in an appendix:

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference - so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other.²⁸

²⁵ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 58.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 107.

American Indians often came to similar conclusions. The Dakota Sioux leader Charles Alexander Eastman, known also by his Indian name Ohiyesa ("Winner"), challenged the illusion that the United States was a modern Christian civilized nation and maintained that Christian faith was much closer to the indigenous American Indian religious traditions than to so-called "modern civilization": It is my personal belief, after thirty-five years' experience of it, that there is no such thing as 'Christian civilization.' I believe that Christianity and modern civilization are opposed and irreconcilable, and the spirit of Christianity and of our ancient religion is essentially the same."²⁹ On one occasion Eastman encountered an older Indian who reflected on the identity of Jesus as an American Indian:

I have come to the conclusion that this Jesus was an Indian. He was opposed to material acquirement and to great possessions. He was inclined to peace. He was as unpractical as any Indian and set no price upon his labor of love. These are not the principles upon which the white man has founded his civilization. It is strange that he could not rise to these simple principles which were commonly observed among our people.³⁰

Eastman strove to distinguish authentic Christian faith from what the white Americans were doing: "My effort was to make the Indian feel that Christianity is not at fault for the white man's sins, but rather the lack of it, and I freely admitted that this nation is not Christian, but declared that the Christians in it are trying to make it so."³¹

White Christians played strong roles both in defending and attacking slavery during the early nineteenth century, and so the American Civil

²⁹ Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa), *The Soul of the Indian* (1911; reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 6; see also David Martínez, *Dakota Philosopher: Charles Eastman and American Indian Thought* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009).

³⁰ Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa), *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* 1916; reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 81.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

War involved a strong theological dimension.³² In the controversies over slavery, many white American Protestant churches divided into northern and southern branches. Even though Pope Gregory XVI condemned the slave trade in 1839 in his apostolic letter *In Supremo Apostolatus Fastigio*, many American Catholic bishops and institutions owned slaves; and many American Catholic leaders stayed on the sidelines of the raging debates.³³ Some Catholic bishops in the South defended the institution of slavery; Bishop Auguste Martin of Natchitoches, Louisiana issued a pastoral letter, which justified slavery, referring to both the curse upon Canaan and the allegedly degraded position of Africans. The Congregation of the Index delegated Vincenzo Gatti, O.P., to respond to the pastoral letter. Gatti pointedly rejected Martin's claim that African Americans shared the curse of Canaan; Gatti questioned first of all whether they were actually Canaan's descendants, but he went on to insist that the redemption offered by Jesus Christ would have ended any such curse if it did exist. Gatti also chided Bishop Martin for claiming that blacks suffered from an "original degradation" from which whites were supposedly immune; Gatti reminded the bishop that original sin is strictly universal and argued that with education blacks could become equal to whites.³⁴ On December 17, 1864, Pope Pius IX approved Gatti's recommendation that Martin's pastoral letter on slavery be placed on the Index of Forbidden Books.

Some American Catholics, such as Orestes Brownson, criticized slavery but nonetheless accepted racist attitudes. Brownson, a firm opponent of slavery, spoke for many Catholics in both the North and the South when he affirmed: "The inferior races, the yellow, the red, or the black, nearly all savage, barbarous, or semi-barbarous, are not . . .

³² Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press); Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006).

³³ Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 39-66.

³⁴ Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 56.

types of the primitive man. . . They mark rather so many stages or degrees in human degeneracy. . . The African negro is not the primitive man . . . but the degenerate man.”³⁵ European American Catholics generally shared the racism of American society at large, viewing African Americans and American Indians as inherently inferior.

White racist attitudes survived the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, shaping the institution of the notorious Jim Crow Laws, which systematically discriminated against African Americans throughout the South. Racism also led to the establishment of a reign of terror through the lynching of African Americans. White Christians often combined their interpretation of Christian faith with discriminatory beliefs and practices; but even in the period of widespread lynching during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African Americans continued to distinguish between Christian faith and the actions of European Americans who called themselves “Christian.” Like the authors of the spirituals, African American artists during this period interpreted the Bible in relation to the experiences of African Americans; European American Christian leaders, however, were generally oblivious to the parallel between the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the repeated lynching of African Americans. Cone notes the irony that African American artists saw so clearly what European American Christian leaders could not:

What enabled artists to see what Christian theologians and ministers would not? What prevented these theologians and ministers, who should have been the first to see God’s revelation in black suffering, from recognizing the obvious gospel truth? Did it require such a leap of imagination to recognize the visual and symbolic overtones between the cross and the lynching tree, both places of execution in the ancient and modern worlds?³⁶

³⁵ Orestes Brownson, “Abolition and Negro Equality,” cited in Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 61.

³⁶ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 94.

Cone comments that singing, dancing, and shouting vividly expressed the paradoxical combination of “both the wretchedness and the transcendent spirit of empowerment that kept blacks from going under, as they struggled, against great odds, to acknowledge humanity denied.”³⁷ The challenge was daunting: “On the one hand, faith spoke to their suffering, making it bearable, while, on the other hand, suffering contradicted their faith, making it unbearable.”³⁸ While whites interpreted Christianity as supporting racist practices and perspectives, African Americans and American Indians repeatedly found support and hope in the promises of the gospel.

Civil Rights Movement

Ever since the eighteenth century, Christian communities had long been areas where African Americans could develop and exercise leadership and communication skills. So it is not surprising that in the twentieth century much of the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement came from Christian pastors. As African American leaders looked for strategies of resistance to the dominant racism of their society, the influence of Mahatma Gandhi’s practice of *satyagraha* was of great importance. In 1937 Howard Thurman led a delegation of African American leaders to India to meet Mahatma Gandhi. Thurman learned that Gandhi, like many African Americans, and American Indians, made a distinction between the religion of Jesus and what Christians were doing: “I close this section of my discussion with the rather striking words of Mahatma Gandhi to me: ‘The greatest enemy that the religion of Jesus has in India is Christianity in India.’”³⁹ Thurman and other African Americans studied Gandhi’s practice of *satyagraha* and pondered its relevance for addressing racial discrimination in the United States. Thurman was a friend of Martin Luther King, Sr., and the young Martin Luther King, Jr. studied Thurman’s work carefully.

³⁷ Ibid., 124.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Howard Thurman, “What We May Learn from India,” in *American Religions: A Documentary History*, ed. R. Marie Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 496.

Paradoxically, it was a Hindu who opened the eyes of many Christians to the significance of Jesus's teaching for non-violent resistance to social evil.⁴⁰

Martin Luther King, Jr., eloquently and powerfully combined a strong affirmation of the founding ideals of the United States with a biblical faith rooted in the tradition of African American Christianity. He spoke in a way that engaged the entire national community, delivering his most famous speech on the theme, "I Have a Dream," in 1963 to a large civil rights assembly in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC:

I have a dream today . . . I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. 'And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.' This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be fine one day. This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning. 'My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.'⁴¹

The Civil Rights Movement led to many victories, including the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, both of which were signed by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Tragically, many whites continued to resist the call for racial justice, and Dr. King was assassinated in April 1968. While the Civil Rights Movement profoundly transformed racial relations in the United States for the better, many challenges remain.

⁴⁰ Terrence J. Rynne, *Gandhi and Jesus: The Saving Power of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

⁴¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream," <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm>, accessed February 25, 2016.

Current Situation

More than fifty years after the signing of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, the United States is again in the midst of a major reassessment of racial relations on many levels. Many voices are challenging the judicial and policing practices that have led to the imprisonment or death of numerous African Americans. African Americans have long been aware of the dangers of interactions with police officers, and there has been a practice of African American parents warning their children about how to behave with police.⁴² In the last few years, the nation as a whole has become more aware of the practices of police officers toward African Americans, with many instances of injustice coming to public attention in a new way. The Black Lives Matter Movement has organized demonstrations in many cities to protest racial injustice.

The month of July 2016 was particularly traumatic. Police officers shot two African Americans in questionable circumstances, Alton Sterling in Louisiana and Philando Castile in Minnesota. On the evening of July 7, Black Lives Matter organized a peaceful demonstration in Dallas, Texas, to protest racial inequality and unjustified police violence. The motto was simple: “No Justice, No Peace.” As the orderly demonstration was underway, suddenly shots rang out, killing a total of five police officers and wounding many others present. There was much confusion, and initial reports suggested two or more shooters from different directions. In fact, the sole shooter was an African American military veteran who was enraged over the police shootings of African Americans and who wanted to kill white police officers in revenge.

President Barack Obama was in Europe at the time, but he cut short his visit to Spain in order to return to the United States and speak at the memorial service for the slain police officers in Dallas. His remarks are a moving reflection on the tragic situation of racial relations in light of Christian faith and offer a helpful perspective on the current

⁴² Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

situation. President Obama began by recalling a biblical perspective: “Scripture tells us that in our sufferings there is glory, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. Sometimes the truths of these words are hard to see. Right now, those words test us.”⁴³ Obama mentioned each of the slain police officers, praising their sense of commitment and duty to protect lives.

Obama noted the deep concern felt by many Americans: “Faced with this violence, we wonder if the divides of race in America can ever be bridged. We wonder if an African-American community that feels unfairly targeted by police, and police departments that feel unfairly maligned for doing their jobs, can ever understand each other’s experience.” Nonetheless, the president sought to move beyond the seeming impasse: “I understand. I understand how Americans are feeling. But, Dallas, I’m here to say we must reject such despair. I’m here to insist that we are not as divided as we seem. And I know that because I know America. I know how far we’ve come against impossible odds.”

Obama proceeded to list various examples of courage in the face of danger, as in the actions of the Dallas police protecting the demonstrators while they were under fire. He noted that one African American woman received help from the police in protecting her four sons: “She also said to the Dallas PD [Police Department], ‘Thank you for being heroes.’ And today, her 12-year-old son wants to be a cop when he grows up. That’s the America I know.”

While he has been president, Obama has spoken at a number of memorial services for people killed, and he acknowledged the limits of words at times of acute grief: “I see how easily we slip back into our old notions, because they’re comfortable, we’re used to them. I’ve seen how inadequate words can be in bringing about lasting change.

⁴³ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service for Fallen Dallas Police Officers,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/12/remarks-president-memorial-service-fallen-dallas-police-officers>, accessed July 16, 2016.

I've seen how inadequate my own words have been. And so I'm reminded of a passage in John's Gospel [First John]: Let us love not with words or speech, but with actions and in truth."

Obama recognized the achievements of past struggles for justice: "We also know that centuries of racial discrimination - of slavery, and subjugation, and Jim Crow - they didn't simply vanish with the end of lawful segregation. They didn't just stop when Dr. King made a speech, or the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act were signed. Race relations have improved dramatically in my lifetime. Those who deny it are dishonoring the struggles that helped us achieve that progress."

However, Obama also lamented the limitations of these achievements and the continuing challenge: "But we know - but, America, we know that bias remains. We know it. Whether you are black or white or Hispanic or Asian or Native American or of Middle Eastern descent, we have all seen this bigotry in our own lives at some point. We've heard it at times in our own homes. If we're honest, perhaps we've heard prejudice in our own heads and felt it in our own hearts. . . . No institution is entirely immune. And that includes our police departments. We know this."

Admitting the daunting scale of the problems of racial relations, Obama called upon Americans to see each other's common humanity, but he lamented: "I confess that sometimes I, too, experience doubt. I've been to too many of these things [memorial services for the slain]. I've seen too many families go through this. But then I am reminded of what the Lord tells Ezekiel: I will give you a new heart, the Lord says, and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

Obama prayed for a new heart for the nation, "a heart open to the fears and hopes and challenges of our fellow citizens. . . . Because with an open heart, we can learn to stand in each other's shoes and look at the world through each other's eyes. . . . With an open heart, we can abandon the overheated rhetoric and the oversimplification that reduces whole categories of our fellow Americans not just to opponents, but to enemies." He called for an open heart for both

protestors and police departments so that they can understand each other's concerns. He offered renewed hope for Americans, turning again to the Bible for perspective: "We can decide to come together and make our country reflect the good inside us, the hopes and simple dreams we share. 'We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character, hope.'"

Like Martin Luther King, Jr., Obama drew on both the biblical tradition of seeking justice and offering hope and also on the American national tradition of promising liberty and equality for all before the law. "America does not ask us to be perfect. Precisely because of our individual imperfections, our founders gave us institutions to guard against tyranny and ensure no one is above the law; a democracy that gives us the space to work through our differences and debate them peacefully, to make things better, even if it doesn't always happen as fast as we'd like. America gives us the capacity to change." Obama closed his remarks by again praising the courage of the slain police officers: "We cannot match their courage, but we can strive to match their devotion. May God bless their memory. May God bless this country that we love."

American history demonstrates many ways in which Christian faith has been used and abused in order to justify oppressive systems and discriminatory practices. Christian faith continues to offer a forceful critique that challenges Americans to reject the racial injustice that has so often marred their society. Through its call to recognize the dignity and rights of all human beings and also through its proclamation of hope for reconciliation, Christian faith offers a stimulus to further reflection and social transformation.

The Ahimsa Movement

Tracing its Roots from the Jain-Buddhist Traditions of India

Vincent Sekhar

This article is an attempt to show the roots of Ahimsa in Indian historical and religious settings, taking the clues from the sources mainly from the Sramana or Jain and Buddhist traditions. Dr. Vincent Sekhar is the Editor of this Number. He is Executive Director and Dean of Research in the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions, a Ph.D. institute on Comparative Religion and Culture, recognized by the University of Madras, Chennai. He is also the Secretary for the Jesuit Mission of Interreligious Dialogue in South Asian Jesuit Assistency. His latest books are *Let us Stand up for Prayer - Sacred Texts that Shape Perspectives* (Claretian Publications, Bangalore, 2016) and *Blurred, yet Bright - Journey into the Self in Jaina Tradition* (Sri Satguru Publications, New Delhi 2016).

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India is by and large a *peaceful* country, given its large geographical extent, population, and diversity. In one of the latest news columns, Saudi Arabian Khalaf Al-Harbi has described India as the most tolerant nation in the world: “In India, there are more than 100 religions and more than 100 languages. Yet, the people live in peace and harmony. They have all joined hands to build a strong nation that can produce everything from a sewing needle to the rocket which is preparing to go to Mars. I must say that I feel a bit jealous because I come from a part of the world which has one religion and one language and yet there is killing everywhere. No matter how the world speaks about tolerance, India remains the oldest and most important school to teach tolerance and peaceful co-existence regardless of the religious, social, political

or ethnical differences.”¹ But there are also websites to show that India is one of the least tolerant nations in the world. A fascinating map of the world’s most and least racially tolerant countries indicates that 43.5 % of Indian respondents said that they would not want a neighbour of a different race.² Although this could be taken as an exaggerated view, India’s past history intolerance as summarily revealed by V. Jayaram³ is largely true.

Religious Freedom in India is a fundamental right guaranteed by Article 15 and Article 25 of the Constitution of India. India came to be called a secular nation in the Preamble of Indian constitution. The citizens of India have the right to practice and promote their religion, subject to law and order and public health. Being the birthplace of four major religions Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism and diverse in its outlooks and perspectives, India has remained, as Rajni Kothari would say, “a country built on the foundations of a civilization that is fundamentally non-religious.”⁴ Perhaps it is this spirit of accommodation that has embraced several groups from elsewhere.⁵

The following pages intend to trace the *tolerant* ethos of India in its historical and religious development, despite its several ups and downs, taking the clue from mainly a few religious sources of the *renouncer*

¹ IBNLive.com (05.05.2015) <http://www.msn.com/en-in/news/national/saudi-arabian-columnist-khalaf-al-harbi-calls-india-the-most-tolerant-nation-in-the-world/ar-BBjkbuq>

² Max Fisher <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/05/15/a-fascinating-map-of-the-worlds-most-and-least-racially-tolerant-countries/> The data came from the World Value Survey, which measured the social attitudes of people in different countries, as reported by the Washington Post, May 15, 2013 See, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-among-world-most-racist-countries-britain-tolerant-survey/1/271586.html>

³ V. Jayaram: <http://www.hinduwebsite.com/history/secularism.asp> Jayaram points out to the intolerant attitude of the Vedic people towards the indigenous tribes, the rivalry existed between different groups and sects at the time of Buddha and Mahavira, the tussle between the Brahmins and the Rulers, the neo-converts to Jainism and Buddhism and the subsequent animosity, lack of amity and constant fight between the Saivites, Vashnavites, Buddhists and Jains, rivalry within sects, etc.

⁴ Rajni Kothari: *Communalism in Indian Politics*, Rainbow Publishers, 1998, p. 134

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_religion_in_India gives a list of groups who are happily settled in India like the Jews, Parsi, Tibetan Buddhists, Baha’i, and others.

traditions. Renouncers are those mendicants, who for the sake of seeking the *real* treasure of *freedom from the cycle repeated birth*, left home, family, and children, land, property, cattle, etc. took up the arduous path of asceticism. Religious groups belonging to Jainism, Buddhism, Ajivikism, and the like belong to such renouncer traditions.

Mahavira and Buddha systematized their religious traditions with a new perception of life and the world, and offered to the globe the ideals of life and the means of achieving them. They were from the Kshatriya class and they renounced the world and their duty as Kshatriyas in order to obtain that *precious treasure*, difficult to obtain. Both these traditions trace their spiritual and philosophical legacies to very ancient times, particularly from the Sramana (Samana) ascetic culture. Jainism traces its antiquity to Rishabha, the first Tirthankara,⁶ who renounced his kingdom, performed hard penance, acquired various powers and became an Arhant by destroying karma. After attaining Kevala-jnana, the fullness of knowledge, he advised the people to lead a holy life, to refrain from killing animals, etc. We hear similar stories with regard to other Jaina Tirthankaras like Parsvanatha⁷ and Mahavira.⁸ It was true also of Buddha who renounced the kingdom in order to be enlightened.

Tracing the roots of Ahimsa – the Kshatriya's *theosophical* wisdom

The Sramana religions like Jainism and Buddhism have their roots in indigenous traditions' faith and doctrine. The indigenous people belonged to various tribes and they co-existed with their specific mode of governance, economic pattern, livelihood, cults and practices. Some of their civilizations were well-developed and far advanced in many respects.⁹ In the course of time, these indigenous tribes encountered external forces, whose character was considerably different from the natives. Their mutual

⁶ *Sacred Books of the East*: Vol. XXII, p 282

⁷ Bloomfield, Maurice, Saraga 5 to 8 describes his life in detail; also see the story of Parsvanatha in Kalpa Sutra, *Sacred Books of the East*: Vol. XXII

⁸ The story of Mahavira in Kalpa Sutra, *Sacred Books of the East*: Vol. XXII

⁹ The remains of *Mohenjo daro-Harappa* are evidences to this. *The Cultural Heritage of India*: Vol. I, pp. 113-120 The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Vols. I-V, Calcutta, Reprint 1993

encounter grew into a nature of class divisions known in India like the Brahmanas or the Priestly class, the Kshatriyas or the Military class, etc. and the pattern of relationship became a class-relationship.

Although the word *Kshatriya* was not prominent in the Vedic times, the *Kshatriyas* became the celebrated heroes in the Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Their traits were military, political, as well as intellectual.¹⁰ The *Bhauma Sukta* of the Atharva Veda¹¹ portrays the world of the *Eka-vratya*, known as the *Brahmavid*¹² or knowers of Brahman. The Kshatriyas or the kings and the nobles in the Eastern region often held discussions on the cosmo-theosophical subjects in their land. The new doctrine preached by them was the path of complete renunciation or the *Nivrtti marga* in order to be free from the cycle of births. This view was different from the *Samvrtti marga* or the perpetual hankering after the better heavens or *Svarga* or anything mundane. Such ideas are plenty in the Upanishads, which in fact governed the philosophical and the theological systems ever since the Vedic period.

The theosophical ideas preached by the Vratya-kshatriyas¹³ were Karma, the power of action and the consequent Rebirth, realizing oneself in tune with Brahman, the eternal Reality, and thus attain the great ideal of freedom through liberative knowledge and right conduct. At the court of Janaka, Jaratkarava Artabhaga asks Yajnavalkya about a person after his death and to which they discuss about Karma.¹⁴ Sacrifices could not do

¹⁰ The supremacy of the Kshatriyas is lauded in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: VI.2.8. King Pravahana Jaivali tells Brahmana Gautama, "Before this, this knowledge did not reside in any Brahmana" and a similar statement in *Chandogya Upanishad*: V.3.7

¹¹ Atharva Veda: XII.1 *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XLII. The Hymns of the Atharva Veda, (trans.) R. T. J. Griffith. (ed.) Satavalakar, S.D. Aundh, 1943

¹² A.A. Macdonell and A.B. Keith: Vol. 2, p. 79 *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*: Vols. I-II, Motilal Banarsidass Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1995, first published in 1912

¹³ According to some scholars, the Vratyas were *ecstatics* of the Kshatriya class and forerunners of the Yogin.

¹⁴ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: III 2.12-13 The discussion says that when a living being dies there always remained a remnant of unrewarded merit and unpunished guilt from which derived the germ of a new existence. Actions, character and deeds of a person accompanied the one at the moment of departure. This idea was different from the older notion that a man hoped for a blessed end after life, which might be in the company of forefathers or gods. Naciketagni in *Katha Upanishad* portrays Yama's immortal status through the impermanent means of ritual; ref. *Sacred Books of the East*: Vol. XV, pp 1-24, also see Chand. Up. 5.10.1f

anything more than securing temporary happiness in higher forms of existence and not completely free people from the cycle of repeated births.¹⁵

Hence, securing a better status in the next birth could not be the real focus of life, except immortality. The quest for immortality was quite different from anything mundane like wealth. Chandogya Upanishad¹⁶ points out that cattle and wealth, wife and slaves, fields and houses are all merely limited things and they are contrasted with the infinity of the Spirit. This explains the sections relating to Yajnavalkya in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.¹⁷ The fourth chapter brings out the legend of Janasruti and Raikva¹⁸ in which the knowledge of *Brahman*, the mysterious power, is far superior to wealth and liberality. And the object of the Upanishads was to teach the knowledge of Brahman.¹⁹ The Kshatriya theosophical wisdom was so compelling that Brahmins went to them to learn the secrets beyond life.²⁰ We may well agree with P. Deussen²¹ that the doctrine of *Atman* was cultivated primarily in Kshatriya circles, but adopted only in later times by the Brahmins.

There are references to the Vedic poets in the Keshi Sukta of the Rig Veda,²² who express awe at the sight of naked ascetics with long hair. These ascetics were generally treated with contempt, calling them with names *Sishnadevas* (one who is nude), and exhorted Indra to protect them from their obstruction of animal sacrifices.²³ Prof. Das Gupta

¹⁵ The second section of the first Mundaka condemns the sacrifices as 'frail boats' (plava hy ete adrdha-yajnarupah): those who follow the ritualistic path or engage in charitable works keep on revolving in the cycle of existence.

¹⁶ *Chandogya Upanishad*: Ch VII 23-25

¹⁷ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: II.4

¹⁸ *Chandogya Upanishad*: Ch IV 4, 3

¹⁹ In Rig Veda Brahman denotes 'a mysterious power which can be called forth by various ceremonies: it also denotes a magical force derived from the orderly co-operation of the hymns, chants and the sacrificial gifts'. It is purely a spiritual force. (Rig Veda: viii 3.9; ii 2.10; vi.75.19; etc. The Upanishads aim to impart the knowledge of this Brahman.

²⁰ The Upanishads illustrate a number of examples relating to Uddalaka Aruni, Pravahana Jaivali, Svetaketu, Uddalaka's son, Gargya Balaki, King Ajatasatru of Kasi, King Asvapati Raikya, and others. (*Chandogya Upanishad*: V 11-24)

²¹ P. Deussen: *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*: Vol. 7, p 721

²² Rig Veda x.136 of the vratya book of the Atharva Veda (Book XV)

²³ Rig Veda vii.22.5

contends that both Jainism and Buddhism appear to have arisen out of a reaction against the sacrificial discipline of the Brahmanas marked by an aversion to the taking of animal life and against the practice of animal sacrifice.²⁴ These Sramana sages engaged themselves in the fight for their *Religion of Ahimsa*.

Both Jaina and Buddhist systems recognize that *injury and harm* done to living beings are caused primarily by passions and selfishness, which result in violence. Acharanga Sutra, the first and the earliest Jaina Canon, expounds the phenomenon of violence in these terms: “the (living) world is afflicted, miserable, difficult to instruct and without discrimination. In this world full of pain, suffering by their different acts, see the benighted ones cause great pain.”²⁵ The very first sermon of Buddha in the Deer-Park has all the elements of friendliness and compassion, *maitri* and *karuna*.²⁶ The fundamental truths of Buddhism (the Four Noble Truths) lay emphasis on the reality of pain and suffering.

The Ashokan Edicts – memory of a *harmonious* governance

Yet another historical memory in favour of a polity based on ahimsa, good-will, and tolerance is the Emperor Asoka’s edicts of 3rd Century BCE.²⁷ These edicts known as the *Dhamma Edicts* or instructions to keep up the moral codes are found scattered throughout India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The rock and pillar inscriptions are mainly concerned with establishing moral and political reforms in the geographical domain of the king in order to create a just and humane society. Emperor Ashoka, after the war with the Kalingas, got converted to Buddhist ideals such as compassion, moderation, tolerance, and respect for life. He also hoped that his subjects would likewise adopt his religion and these principles. The King considered these reforms

²⁴ Dasgupta, S. A., *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, Cambridge University Press, p. 208

²⁵ *Sacred Books of the East*: Vol. 22, Acharanga Sutra, I.1.2.1

²⁶ *Sacred Books of the East*: Vol. 13, Vinaya Part I, p. 91ff

²⁷For a quick reading, see *Edicts of King Ashoka*: an English rendering by Ven. S. Dhammika (1994) <http://www.accesstosight.org/lib/authors/dhammika/wheel386.html>

as part of his commitment to the Buddhist faith and discipline and his duty to ensure good and just governance. But his conversion to Buddhism did not deter him from being tolerant to other religions, as some of his Edicts clearly show.

In Edict no. 4, the king mentions about his conversion: “the sound of the drum has been replaced by the sound of the Dhamma”. The Emperor’s new desire was to put an end to all fighting and killing and be inclined to the practice of Dhamma and make similar recommendations to his future generations. In another Edict, he confesses his deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas: “Indeed, Beloved-of-the-Gods is deeply pained by the killing, dying and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered... I have had this Dhamma edict written so that my sons and great-grandsons may not consider making new conquests.... or better still, that they consider making conquest by Dhamma only, for that bears fruit in this world and the next.” (Rock Edict 13)

The First of the *Dhamma* edicts reflects the Emperor’s quick action as the result of his conversion. It was concerning the slaughter of animals and frequent feasting: “Formerly, in the kitchen of Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, hundreds of thousands of animals were killed every day to make curry. But now with the writing of this Dhamma edict only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer are killed, and the deer not always. And in time, not even these three creatures will be killed.” (Rock Edict 1)²⁸ Apart from reducing the number of killings, he established medical facility to both men and animals: “Everywhere has Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, made provision for two types of medical treatment: medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals. Wherever medical herbs suitable for humans or animals are not available, I have had them imported and grown. Along roads I have had wells dug and trees planted for the benefit of humans and animals.” (Rock Edict 2)

Emperor Ashoka added *Non-violence* and *moderation* as part of his citizens’ general conduct and instructed his officers to monitor their practice: “Respect for mother and father is good, generosity to friends,

²⁸ <http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html>

acquaintances, relatives, Brahmans and ascetics is good, not killing living beings is good, moderation in spending and moderation in saving is good. The Council shall notify the Yuktas about the observance of these instructions *in these very words.*" (Rock Edict 3)

The Emperor saw to it that all religious communities were protected. He took special care to promote and foster harmony by establishing *Dhamma Mahamatras*, the officials for religious duties: "They (Dhamma Mahamatras) work among all religions for the establishment of Dhamma, for the promotion of Dhamma, and for the welfare and happiness of all who are devoted to Dhamma.... so that they may be free from harassment." (Rock Edict 5) Ashoka positively wished that *all* religions should exist without exception, seeing in them something common and positive: "Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all religions should reside everywhere, for all of them desire self-control and purity of heart." (Rock Edict 7) The Emperor thought that learning religious riches from one another had enriching and curative effects. He said: "There should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause.... Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought 'Let me glorify my own religion,' only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions." (Rock Edict 12)

Similar to Buddha's instruction to the young lad Sigala,²⁹ the Emperor wanted all rituals to be ethically meaningful: "In times of sickness, for the marriage of sons and daughters, at the birth of children, before embarking on a journey, on these and other occasions, people perform various ceremonies.... but they bear little fruit. What does bear great

²⁹Sigalovada Sutta: The Discourse to Sigala, *The Layperson's Code of Discipline*, translated from the Pali by Narada Thera (1996) <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.nara.html> Buddha instructs a young boy Sigala to remember various people like parents and others with gratefulness every time he was turning to a particular direction while doing the water ablution.

fruit, however, is the ceremony of the Dhamma. This involves proper behavior towards servants and employees, respect for teachers, restraint towards living beings, and generosity towards ascetics and Brahmans.” (Rock Edict 9, 11)

Mahabharata – Ahimsa and justifiable Himsa

Mahabharata, the Hindu classical text written perhaps around 400 BCE, mentions in several places that Ahimsa or *Non-violence is the greatest of all virtues*: “Ahimsa paramo dharma”. Tuladhara of the Vaishya Order discourses with the Brahmana ascetic Jajali in these words: “The mode of living which is founded upon a total harmlessness towards all creatures or [in case of actual necessity] upon a minimum of such harm, is the highest morality.”³⁰

Though said to be a Book of (Kurukshetra) War, Mahabharata points out to the futility of war in several conversations. Yudhisthira, the eldest son of King Pandu and Queen Kunti and the leader of the Pandavas says, “Both parties cannot win success, nor both be defeated. The loss, however, on both sides may be equal. . . . Under all circumstances, however, war is a sin. . . . It is true that defeat is not much removed from death, but his loss also, O Krishna, is not less who wins victory.”³¹ On another occasion, Gandhari advises her son Duryodhana: “O son, there is no good in battle, no virtue, no profit. How can it bring happiness then? Even victory is not always certain. Do not set your heart, therefore, on battle.”³²

Mahabharata sums up the significance of ahimsa in the following passage: “Abstention from cruelty is the highest Religion (dharma). Abstention from cruelty is the highest self-control. Abstention from cruelty is the highest gift. Abstention from cruelty is the highest penance. Abstention from cruelty is the highest sacrifice. Abstention from cruelty is the highest puissance. Abstention from cruelty is the highest friend. Abstention from cruelty is the highest happiness. Abstention from cruelty is the highest truth. Abstention from cruelty is

³⁰ Kisari Mohan Ganguli (tr.): *The Mahabharata*, Shantiparva 262.5-6 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12b089.htm>

³¹ Ibid. Udyogaparva 72.52-54 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m05/m05072.htm>

³² Ibid. Udyogaparva 129.40 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m05/m05129.htm>

the highest Sruti. Gifts made in all sacrifices, ablutions performed in all sacred waters, and the merit that one acquires from making all kinds of gifts mentioned in the scriptures, all these do not come up to abstention from cruelty (in point of the merit that attaches to it).³³

Himsa – Is killing and punishing Justified?

Already in the Mahabharata times, we see the justification of *minimum* violence in the case of *actual necessity*. But there are other justifying reasons coming on the way. There is a long conversation between Yudhishtira and Arjuna recorded in the Shanti Parva. Yudhishtira is portrayed to stand for Ahimsa and Renunciation and Arjuna defends slaughter and chastisement. Arjuna defends his position by justifying that killing is the *duty* of the Kshatriyas and slaughtering brings about *fame* for the kings and gods, and killing is something common in the *nature's way* and ordained by the gods: "Without slaughter, no man has been able to achieve fame in this world or acquire wealth or subjects.... I do not behold the creature in this world that supports life without doing any act of injury to others. Animals live upon animals, the stronger upon the weaker.... Behold all things again are devoured by the Destroyer when he comes!"³⁴ Besides, only the *coward* and *foolish* kings would retire to the woods.³⁵ Arjuna points out that killing for *supporting oneself* is a *higher* duty: "What higher duty is there than supporting one's life? There are many creatures that are so minute that their existence can only be inferred. With the failing of the eyelids alone, they are destroyed.... Others may be seen, who (in the observance of domesticity) tilling the soil, uprooting herbs, cutting off trees and killing birds and animals, perform sacrifices and at last attain to heaven."³⁶

Arjuna defends chastisement or *danda* (and in modern terms, Punishment and War) on the basis of justice: *the unjust should be punished*. And he defends and promotes *danda* or punishment for

³³ Ibid. Anusashanaparva 116.28-30 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m13/m13b081.htm>

³⁴ Ibid. Santiparva, 15 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a015.htm>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

wrong-doers: "Everyone in this world is kept straight by chastisement (danda or punishment). A person naturally pure and righteous is scarce. Yielding to the fear of chastisement, man becomes disposed to observe rules and restraints.... Upon chastisement depend all creatures."³⁷

In the course of the conversation, Arjuna mentions about two discernible acts and chooses the second: the two things, namely, "abstention from injury and injury prompted by righteous motives. Of these two, that is superior by which righteousness may be acquired."³⁸ So whether war or no war is to be justified on the basis whether it serves *righteousness* (dharma) or not. In other words, it is the protection of the country and its people from the onslaught of adharma or evil. Arjuna would continue to defend this position by saying that "There is no act that is wholly meritorious, nor any that is wholly wicked. Right or wrong, in all acts, something of both is seen."³⁹

And, finally, Arjuna takes up the philosophical weapon to convince his brother by saying what Sri Krishna would say in the Second Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita:⁴⁰ "Slay thy foes, O son of Kunti, and protect thy friends.... The inner soul of every creature is incapable of being slain. When the soul is incapable of being slain, how then can one be slain by another? As a person enters a new house, even so a creature enters successive bodies...."⁴¹ So, once slain, the person is not really dead but acquires another life.

Himsa – Is *Self-mortification and Self-sacrifice* Justified?

There had been debates on whether one can take away one's life in the process of saving oneself and/or others. For example, can a person

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Bhagavad Gita*: II.16-27 "The Spirit is neither born nor does it die at any time. It does not come into being, or cease to exist. It is unborn, eternal, permanent, and primeval. The Spirit is not destroyed when the body is destroyed... The Spirit cannot be cut, burned, wetted, or dried. It is eternal, all pervading, unchanging, immovable, and primeval... Knowing the Spirit as such you should not grieve... Because death is certain for the one who is born, and birth is certain for the one who dies. Therefore, you should not lament over the inevitable."

⁴¹ Kisari Mohan Ganguli (tr.): *Op. Cit. Mahabharata, Santiparvan*, 15

harm himself/herself or others to safeguard one's own interests? In a physical sense, self-mortification is usually understood as inflicting pain upon oneself. But in a religious and ethical sense it does not result in pain. It is rather the joy of offering oneself in sacrificial service. The motivation offers tremendous satisfaction and joy to the one who is involved in such a practice.

In the Brahmanic traditions, sacrifice of animals, birds, etc. was allowed in order to obtain wealth and prosperity to the owner of the sacrifice or the yajamana. Sacrifice of these birds and animals were justified on the basis that the victims will enjoy a better status in the life to come.⁴² But the Jaina Acaryas, particularly Amrtacandra and Amitagati, maintain absolute Ahimsa and preach that it is wrong to kill even *destructive* animals.⁴³ In Buddhist Mahayana tradition, a Bodhisattva could show compassion by resolving to suffer the torments and agonies of the dreadful fire (or purgatories) in order to lead all beings to perfect enlightenment.⁴⁴ A Bodhisattva is the greatest forgiver and embodiment of forbearance. Even if his body is destroyed and cut into hundred pieces with swords and spears he does not conceive any anger against his cruel persecutors.⁴⁵

Jaina tradition upholds a practice called *Sallekhana* or *Samthara*, considered good, wholesome, proper, beatifying, meritorious. This practice is recognized as *religious self-purification* and it is highly commended for both the laity and the monks. It is described at length in the first Anga of the Acharanga Sutra.⁴⁶ A Jaina monk undertakes

⁴²George Bühler (tr.): *The Laws of Manu* 5.39-40, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu/manu05.htm>

⁴³ Amrtacandrasuri: Purusharthasiddhyupaya, 79-89, *The Sacred Books of the Jinas*, Vol. 4, Ed. with trans. Ajit Prasada, The Central Jain Publishing House, Lucknow, 1933

⁴⁴ Siksasamuccaya, P.L. Vaidhya, edn. The Mithila Institute of Post Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, Darbhanga, 1961, p. 148

⁴⁵ Siksasamuccaya, Ibid. p. 103

⁴⁶ It is a long passage in Acharanga Sutra: i.vii.6 "If this thought occurs to a monk: 'I am sick and not able, at this time, to regularly mortify the flesh,' that monk should regularly reduce his food; regularly reducing his food, and diminishing his sins, 'he should take proper care of his body, being immovable like a beam; exerting himself he dissolves his body'. Entering a village, ...a monk should beg for straw; having begged

this extreme form of asceticism of self-mortification when he suffers from a fatal disease or when he is unable to follow the rules of his Order⁴⁷ or when he is faced with obstacles to follow his religion. In Jaina history, the vow of Sallekhana is taken in circumstances like drought, old age, incurable fatal disease, and gradual depletion of the strength of the body.⁴⁸ There had always been controversies and court cases, debating endlessly on the justification of the *religious* practice of Sallekhana or Samthara.⁴⁹ Can ahimsa and sallekhana go together? Indicating the four main categories of suicides according to Durkheim, Sallekhana belongs to the second category, namely, the *altruistic* suicide. It is undertaken by the Jains for the sake of *religion*.⁵⁰

Apart from religious suicide and self-mortification that are justified on *religious* grounds, both Buddhism and Jainism seek justification for violence in certain other cases. For example, the Jains accept certain activities of the laity performed by way of duty, for instance, punishment, etc. They profess that there is no himsa, which has purely pleasant and agreeable consequences.⁵¹ But they also believe that as long as one engages oneself in worldly life one cannot refrain from doing injury, and thus attaining salvation is impossible as a householder. Hence, one

for straw he should retire with it to a secluded spot.... he should spread the straw on it. Then he should there and then effect (the religious death called) itvara.... leaving this frail body, overcoming all sorts of pains and troubles through trust in this (religion), he accomplishes this fearful (religious death). Even thus he will in due time put an end to existence. This has been adopted by many who were free from delusion; it is good, wholesome, proper, beatifying, meritorious. Thus I say.”

⁴⁷ James Hastings (ed.): *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 4, p. 484

⁴⁸ **Ratankarandaka Sravakacara: 122** (<http://files.jain.us.com/shrish/4.books/Ratnakarandakashravakachara-English.pdf>)

⁴⁹The Rajasthan High Court on Monday held the Jain religious ritual of ‘Santhara’ (fast unto death) as illegal making it punishable under section 306 and 309 IPC (abetment of suicide). (<http://www.firstpost.com/india/rajasthan-high-court-holds-jain-santhara-ritual-of-fast-unto-death-illegal-2386718.html>) Purusarthasiddhyupaya claims that Sallekhana is not suicide because of the devoid of passions while doing this practice. There are five desires that are fatal at the time of Sallekhana: desire to live, desire to die, attachment to friends, recollection of pleasures and desire for future pleasures. (Tattvartha Sutra: VII, 32)

⁵⁰ *Jinamanjari*: Vol. XI, No. 1, Bramhi Society Publication, Ontario, Canada, April 1995, pp. 24-25

⁵¹ Acharanga Sutra: 1.4.2.6

has to become a monk/nun and aspire a *religious* way of life in order to practise Ahimsa in a more perfect manner. Secondly, Indian history also reveals that there had been Jaina kings, generals and soldiers who, for the sake of duty, had to engage in political wars. But the Jaina Acharyas do not call them heretics (*mithyadrsti*) because of blood they shed during wars.⁵² Extremism is not accepted in Buddhism as it chooses the *middle path* for its goal.⁵³ Suicide is condemned without qualification: "A monk who preaches suicide, who tells man, 'Do away with this wretched life, full of suffering and sin; death is better' in fact preaches murder, is a murderer, is no longer a monk."⁵⁴ Buddhism considers *danda* or punishment as *unattached* violence. The crime includes both punishment of criminals and waging a righteous war.

Gandhi – Violence is accepted as *necessary evil*

Yet another epoch that can be remembered in Indian history is the time of Gandhi. Born on October 2, 1869 in Porbandar in Gujarat State and influenced by Jain principles, Gandhi was still a staunch Hindu and an *Ahimsavadi*, a follower of Ahimsa guided by Truth. To him, Hinduism with its message of Ahimsa was the most glorious religion in the world just like his wife was to him.⁵⁵ But Gandhi accepted violence as a means to promote social good. For Gandhi, "to cause pain or wish ill to or take the life of any being out of anger or a selfish intent is Himsa. On the other hand after a calm and clear judgement to kill or to cause pain to a living being with a view to its spiritual or physical benefit from a pure, selfless intent may be the purest form of Ahimsa... the final test to its violence or non-violence is after all the intent underlying the act."⁵⁶ Thus, killing is not himsa when life is destroyed

⁵² Example of King Chandragupta Maurya (4 Cent. B. C.), King Kumarapala, (12 Cent. A. D.), and others. See Jaina Gazette: Vol. 12, p. 266, Lucknow, 1915-16

⁵³ But, unfortunately, no religions are free from violence. Extremism, fundamentalism, chauvinism, militancy, etc. are becoming more common now-a-days destroying, burning, killing, threatening one another and causing divisions and hate between people. A closer look at the Net sources and YouTube clippings would subscribe to the above.

⁵⁴ Parajika III, *Sacred Books of the East*: Vol. 13, p. 4

⁵⁵ Gandhi, MK: *The Way to Communal Harmony*, Compiled and Edited by U.R. Rao, 1963, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, pp. 47-48

⁵⁶ Gandhi: *Young India*, 4.10, 1928

for the sake of those whose life is taken.⁵⁷ Ahimsa is not merely *a-himsa*, a negative state of harmlessness but it is a positive state of love, of doing good, even to the evil doer. Ahimsa is not passive acquiescence, just allowing the evildoer to continue the wrong, and much less, tolerating it. On the contrary, Ahimsa is love, and it requires one to resist the wrong doer by dissociating oneself from him even though it may offend him or injure him physically.⁵⁸

Gandhi had certain principles to guide him when and where violence was admissible: i) if non-violence would cause the sacrifice of some other values of great worth like honour of women, freedom and honour of the nation, overall strength and growth of the race, or survival of democracy was at stake.⁵⁹ ii) if a sufficient number of people were not ready and could not be persuaded to believe in and practice true Satyagraha, violent struggles for just causes would be justified.⁶⁰ iii) if there is a little prospect of the conversion of the oppressor to the course of justice through Satyagraha, the victims must defend themselves violently. Gandhi deeply believed that at the heart of the doctrine of Non-violence was the principle of *universal convertibility*. That is, the belief that all evil-doers, anywhere and in all circumstances, can be persuaded to give up their course of evil if their victims practise Satyagraha.⁶¹ Similar principles are laid down for a war to be just.⁶²

Generally, violence is not justified except as a *necessary evil*, an evil done out of love, piety, pity or duty, and this is the most controversial part of the doctrine of Ahimsa. For example, can we condemn fighting against unjust authority or participating in a military or revolutionary struggle in order to achieve social just objectives? If we do not condemn,

⁵⁷ Sharma: *Gandhi: As a Political thinker*, Indian Press, Allahabad 1st impression, p. 52

⁵⁸ Gandhi, M.K.: *Young India*, Jan. as quoted by in Jag Parvesh Chander: *Teachings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Lahore Works, 1945, p. 412

⁵⁹ Bose, N.K.: *Selections from Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1948, p. 155, 156, 168, 170

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 169, 174

⁶¹ Ibid. pp 159,175-177

⁶² Tahtinen, Unto: *Nonviolence as an Ethical Principle*, Turku 1964, Turunlipisto, p. 66

we would be culpable in promoting an unjust system, the consequence of which might subsequently starve the poor in hunger and so on. Poverty is an evil, but it is considered as the result of *fate* in many human communities. They hardly realize that poverty is the result of social and economic oppression. Anything that tends to perpetuate poverty and any diversion to the collective struggle against oppression is betrayal of the poor.

In most situations, the violence of the oppressor prompts counter violence of the oppressed. Although debatable, today in practical circumstances, it is violence that assures the defense of the poor and it is violence that stands in the face of exploitation, coercion and oppression by the rich and the powerful. There can be situations in which the use of violence alone can set the process of transformation in motion.

Is Ahimsa still a myth?

Looking at the world today, and seeing the news-clippings every day, many sympathizers and *Ahimsavadi* have almost given up hope. They almost surrender to human history that persists in violence. Some believe that it is the only means left to the weak and the powerless. Behavioural sciences too indicate that it is only natural for human beings to be violent. Political mentors, bureaucrats, and social thinkers say that several aspects of Non-violence like self-governance, self-effort, and passive resistance and so on have led individuals and society to isolation.⁶³

Generally people are non-violent only temporarily, and that too as *controlled-violence* to certain limits. Violence has become a way of life, a business, and a livelihood. People are systematically employed in causing dissension, vandalism, destruction, and killings. Seeing the trends such as these, even the public is forced to think that only violence could bring about change in society more easily than by other means. And people periodically indulge in it. Media, particularly news channels and films, draw people's attention to violent incidents and events more than anything else. Even law and order are ensured by resorting to violence by the so-called socialist, democratic governments. They use violent and repressive means to ensure their way. The same can be

⁶³ Ibid., P. 165, 167

said of groups, communities, states and even countries. People take to any means in order to achieve their selfish interests. These and several other reasons have raised a fundamental question even among its believers whether non-violence is still a myth or a failure. Even Gandhi found his life-work of guiding the national political Satyagraha to be only an *illusion* of Non-violence. It succeeded only in part.⁶⁴

People strongly believe that it is one's *spiritual* tradition that raises a person to one's *dignity*. People live for certain ideals and they achieve them in their lives through an acceptable way of life. They are the ethical principles that govern one's activities. Hence violence can only be an *exception* rather than a *rule*. It is this optimism that keeps principles like ahimsa alive and meaningful. Perhaps people who think that violence is in-built in nature, and that human beings cannot rise up to higher levels of thinking and acting might approve and defend violence uncritically. But *moral* life is not *natural* life, as Atreya would say. It requires *effort* on the part of human beings to become moral.⁶⁵ Leaders of the world realize now-a-days that it is through peaceful means of mediation and dialogue, friendly bilateral relations, peace-commissions, voluntary self-denial, etc. that dangers can be averted and conflicts managed. It is true that the works of peace is not yet complete but the orientation seems to be clear and positive. This positive note slowly dismantles the fear that ahimsa is a failure or it is only a myth.

Ahimsa – a New guideline to *Environmentalism*

In contemporary times, Ahimsa takes different forms. One of them is that Ahimsa gives a new guideline to a new way of seeing our Earth and our Environment. The Ahimsa ideal leads people to a new knowledge about our surroundings and, subsequently, to a new engagement to protect our Mother Earth. In the recent Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis "*Laudato Si', mi' Signore*" – "*Praise be to you, my Lord*", the Pope reminds us the *Canticle of Saint Francis of Assisi* "that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us." The Pope

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 168

⁶⁵ Atreya: *Moral and Spiritual foundations of Peace*, International Standard Publications, Banares, 1952, p. 69

To conclude, Ahimsa is not new to India. It is preserved in its age-old traditions, historically and religiously, and realized in action. A 5000 year old tradition has stabilized its thinking and role in different times and situations in history. India's actions would bear and reflect the basic ideals it stands for. In a nation with a population over 1.3 billion and people living diverse cultures and traditions in various geographically different regions, egoism and animosity are not uncommon. Distinct forms of violence in all its forms like physical, verbal, psychological, emotional, sexual, cultural, financial abuse, etc. are still persistently noticed in all regions of India. But the ahimsaic forms of understanding, adoption, acceptability, accommodation, adjustment, tolerance, and sensitivity are also in vogue and in appreciable degree among its inhabitants despite regionalism and caste divisions.

This article is an attempt to show the roots of Ahimsa in Indian historical and religious settings, taking the clues from the sources mainly from the Sramana or Jain and Buddhist traditions. There is no doubt that Mahabharata is a rich text showing the diverse sentiments of human life and relationship. The text, though confined to its time and cultural artifact like any other, is known for its veracity in handling the different problems and situations vital to human life, particularly when people are in dilemma in making decisions. Thus it would also talk about ahimsa and himsa in a larger context and make their import, justifications, etc. reachable to daily living. It would not be surprising to anyone familiar with Indian texts that things at the level of moral discourse have not changed very much from time immemorial. And that is the asset of India and India's stability in living its ideals like Ahimsa.